
THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER
NOVEL 3
written by
MEGURU SETO
illustrated by
TAKEHANA NOTE

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EMMA BRIGHTNESS
NOIR STARDIA
Time started to move strangely, and the rest of the world bled away. It was like Emma and I were the only ones out there. We came together and broke apart, stretching out our arms and spinning back-to-back, perfectly in step.


LOLA
"There!"
They wrapped me in their arms, squishing me between them. They were so soft and tender—it didn't hurt at all. I could feel these two beauties pressing against my whole body. How warm they were... the feeling of their breath on my skin...
I'd never felt anything like it before!
LUNA HEELA


"Ouch."
"Ahhh! I-I'm so sorry!"
LAILA OVERLOCK

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NOVEL 3

WRITTEN BY

Meguru Seto

ILLUSTRATED BY

Takehana Note

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER VOL. 3

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Illustrations by Takehana Note

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TRANSLATION: T. Emerson
ADAPTATION: Cae Hawksmoor
LOGO DESIGN: Arbash
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Brian Kearney, Kelly Lorraine Andrews
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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EXTRA CHAPTER

✸ Happiness in Both Hands

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Chapter 1:
Summer Vacation

ON THE DAY of our Hero Academy exam, Emma, Luna, and I defeated a ferocious earth dragon. As our reward, we got the highest score in our class and a summer free of supplementary lessons. All of which meant that, when vacation arrived, we finally had the chance to relax!

"Get up, Noir! It's morning."

I struggled up from the depths of sleep. That was the sound of my father's voice, somewhere outside my room. My little sister Alice was arguing with him.

"Father dearest, today is the start of Noir's summer vacation. Please let him rest."

"Oh, right… I just wanted to see him before I left."

"Let. Him. Rest."

"All right, fine. You win."

Clearly, my father wasn't in a good mood. I wanted to go back to sleep, but I had to see what was up.

"Good morning, father, Alice."

"O-ooh! Noir!" said father. "Good morning, sunshine!"

"I think you owe me a good morning hug, dear brother."

Alice leapt into my arms, burying her face in my chest. I stroked her hair, and even that simple act earned me some LP. Now *that* was always welcome.

"What a beautiful display of familial love," my father said, holding out his arms for a hug of his own.

Alice pushed him away. "This is my special time with Noir," she said. "Got it?"

"When will *my* time come?" my father asked.

Instead of answering, Alice just gave him her sweetest smile. I almost laughed at the devastated look he shot her in return.

“Not even a little giggle?” he asked, disappointed. “Is this what puberty has done to you both?”

“Father, it’s too early. Maybe try a gentler approach next time.”

“I’ll make a note of it.”

While he looked like he was putting some serious thought into some terrible new joke to subject us to, I rolled my eyes and headed down to the living room.

“Good morning, Noir,” said my mother. “You’re on summer break now, aren’t you?”

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna slack off or anything.”

<*What an admirable attitude,*> said Tigerson. <*Shall we do something together?*>

“I’d like that.”

Summer was the perfect time to take it easy, but I still wanted to get some things done—like getting past the eighth floor of the hidden dungeon, or taking on some more requests at the guild.

“What about a trip?” Alice asked.

“A trip, huh?” I said. “Might be fun.”

Summer break lasted a whole two months. I could even go abroad if I wanted! Whatever I chose, I figured I should invite Emma.

“I have some chores to take care of today,” I said. “So don’t worry about me.”

“I hate to leave my boy home all alone,” said father. “But I have work to do.”

“Sorry, sweetie,” mother said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have a nice day, brother dearest.”

Tigerson and I walked out into the yard to see my family off. When they were gone, we set about cleaning the place. I picked up a broom and Tigerson hunted down mice.

“We’ve always had a mouse problem…”

<This estate is quite old, is it not? Such things are unavoidable.>

“Maybe we could build a new house?” I had almost saved up enough money. Well, cool. That could be another goal for summer break.

Once we finished our chores, I got ready to go out. I’d promised to go with Emma to the guild hall.

“Wanna come with, Tigerson?”

<I appreciate the invitation, but it is my duty to protect your home. Although, if you are ever in particular need of my services, I would happily oblige.>

“Thanks for everything you do for us. I’m off, then.”

Even from the street, I could see Tigerson’s head peeking over the top of the yard wall. It was hard to imagine anyone being stupid enough to break in when faced with him.

Emma was along my usual route, hanging out on a street dotted with trees, but something seemed wrong. She was normally so full of energy, but today she looked gloomy and downcast.

“Hey, Emma, are you okay?”

“Oh, Noir. Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

“Don’t worry, I just got here. I’m more worried about *you*. You don’t look so good.”

“Oh, uh, I’m fine. It’s no big deal…”

Something serious was clearly bothering her, but…I didn’t want to pry. I decided to wait until she was ready to talk to me about it, so we just headed for the guild.

“Hey, Noir, have you heard about the Phantom?”

“The what? I don’t think so.”

“The mysterious thief everyone’s talking about. You really haven’t heard?”

“That does sound vaguely familiar. You mean the one who only targets nobles?”

“That’s him! So, the thing about the Phantom is…” Emma paused, fidgeting with her fingers.

“You know that you can tell me anything,” I said. “Right?”

Emma smiled and shook her head. “It’s nothing, really! But, um, if you’re free this weekend, would you join me for the gala? I mean, you *have* to come with me!”

“Aren’t those shindigs for the nobility?” I asked.

Honestly, fancy parties really weren’t something I was interested in. Emma’s father was an established baron, and the other nobles accepted the whole family as one of their own. It was different with the Stardias. My father was only a baronet, and most of the other nobles didn’t count us as truly noble. They rarely invited us to parties, and when they did, it was usually because they needed someone to laugh at.

“I’ll have to dance,” Emma complained. “If you won’t take me, I’ll be stuck with some other boy. If I have to do something like that, I’d rather it be with you…”

“But I’m a terrible dancer.”

“It’s not like I’m the picture of grace,” Emma said. “And anyway, it’s the thought that counts.”

“Fine. I’ll find room in my schedule.”

“Thank you so much! This is why I love you, Noir!”

Emma hugged me for a long time. The LP was *nice*, let me tell you.

When we entered the Odin guild hall, we found a veteran adventurer instructing some newbie.

“Burn their faces into your retinas, kid,” the adventurer said, nodding toward us. “They just joined, but they’re already Grade C.”

“They don’t look that strong…”

“You know what they say: don’t judge a book by its cover. They just slew a dragon, you know.”

“A dragon?! That girl?!”

“Hey now, stop starin’ at her chest, kid. Lay a finger on her and Noir here will gut you.”

“Eeeek!”

Their conversation turned out to be rather unsavory, but Emma just grinned.

“Would you really kill that guy for me, Noir?”

“Doesn’t that feel a little ridiculous?” I said, sidestepping the question. “Look at me. I don’t look like I could hurt a fly, even if I tried!”

Before Emma could reply, the mood inside the hall took a sudden turn. I looked around, trying to figure out why. It must have had something to do with Lola. She was slumped over her counter, looking completely dispirited.

“Hi, Lola, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Oh, you know,” she said. “Nothing special. Just the worst possible thing in the world.”

She was almost on the verge of tears. What could have upset her so much? She took my hand and rubbed it against her cheek, but Emma pulled us apart.

“Excuse me,” Lola said. “I’m really bummed out here, so don’t interfere.”

“Would you just explain what’s wrong already?” Emma snapped.

“Something…was stolen from me. Something really important.” Lola bit her lip, looking deeply upset. “A thief crept into my house and…”

“That *does* sound bad. Did they take money or something?” I asked.

“No, nothing like that. They took…my underwear.”

“Y-your underwear?” I stammered.



“It’s worse than that. They stole all my fanciest pairs, before I even got to show them off! Ugh, I wish I were dead!”

Lola flopped back down on her desk and stopped moving. To her, having her underwear stolen must have been worse than losing money. Emma giggled. She tried to hide it behind her hand, but Lola still noticed.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m sooo sorry you never got the chance to take those panties for a spin. You poor thing.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“You poooor thing.”

“I see,” said Lola. “Well, I suppose I won’t be offering you any requests today, Ms. Emma.”

“Do your damn job!”

“No can do,” said Lola.

But Emma wasn’t giving up so easily. She took my arm and walked me towards the door.

“Hey, I didn’t say I wouldn’t work with Noir!” cried Lola.

“Oh ho ho,” Emma chuckled. “The two of us are off to have some *fun*. It’s our summer vacation, after all.”

“Oh, mine too!” said Lola. “What a coincidence!”

A line of adventurers had started to form at her desk.

“Hey, Lola, babe, I’m beggin’ you, gimme some work…” one moaned.

Lola couldn’t bring herself to ignore them. “All right, fine. Fine! Ugh, the second I’m married, I’m quitting this job!”

Emma and I strolled back into the street, but I was still thinking about Lola. Could her mysterious panty thief have been this Phantom that Emma was talking about? No, it couldn’t be. The Phantom only targeted nobles, after all.

“I guess that’s it for me for today,” Emma said.

“Huh? Don’t you wanna go somewhere together?”

“I would,” Emma said. “But I’ve got something I really need to think about.”

I didn’t want to pry—really, I didn’t!—but something was obviously still bothering her.

“You know…you *can* talk to me, right?”

“Hee hee, you’re such a nice guy, Noir. I promise I’ll talk if I need to, okay? Bye!”

Without another word, she turned on her heel and left. I stood there for a moment, surprised. Still, the day was young, and there were plenty of things I could do. I decided I might as well visit Luna, or go and call on my master.

Chapter 2:
Item Conversion

I HEADED TO THE DUNGEON first to slay a few golden slimes. By now, it was easy for me to deftly dodge and counter their corrosive sputum with my blade. When they were dead, I ate some of the sweet jelly—absolutely delicious—and stored the rest in my Pocket Dimension. Good thing all the monsters here respawned regularly!

“I wonder if I could sell these?” I said. “Hm. Probably not.”

Still, figuring out a way to covertly hawk the jelly could make me a significant profit.

I made my way down to the second floor, and entered my master’s room to find her mumbling to herself.

<I love you, Olivia! I love you, Master. Love ya, Olly. I couldn’t live without you!>

“I know you can’t move, but I have to ask: did you hit your head?”

<I see your tongue is as sharp as ever.>

“Is there some other explanation for this nonsense?” I asked.

<I was just going over my Top 500 Things I Want to Hear from Noir.>

“Top 500? Master, I know you’re bored, but this is too much.”


Boo!
Boo!

Still, I hadn’t been to the dungeon in a while—I’d been busy with the exam, prep for the exam, more prep for the exam, etc. She was probably lonely.

In any case, I changed the subject to something less grumble-worthy.

“So, there’s lots I wanna get done over the summer—earn a bunch of money, get stronger, and start something new, stuff like that.”

<I like it. I like it! You’ve gotta be honest with your desires. If you wanna get stronger, why don’t you use…you-know-what.>

“Remind me?”

<Oh, you forgot the sage advice of the great Olivia? LP conversion skills! Like items and materials and stuff.>

Now that she mentioned it, I did remember. I’d even been saving up. I already had well over 2,500 LP, even though the Item LP Conversion skill she described would cost me well over 800 alone. To be fair, it would give me a whole new way to make LP. And the more valuable the item I converted, the more LP it generated. I tried it out with an old sword I didn’t need anymore, and the iron blade vanished in the blink of an eye. It was an odd sight, but it did earn me 100 LP.

“Master, do you think I’d benefit from the Material Conversion skill, too?”

<I can’t recommend it, honestly. Converting monster materials just isn’t worth it. Even dragon parts aren’t worth much.>

“Well, that sucks…”

<But the Item Conversion skill is a sweet deal LP-wise. Especially if you come across rare weapons that you can’t do jack with. Although I suppose you could always sell ’em.>

“You know, I was just thinking about starting to sell things.”

<It’s a good idea. You could even hire someone to sell them for you.>

“Huh. I never thought about that. I have plenty of money saved up, though. Thanks for the advice. I’ll see you later.”

<What? Leaving already? Not going to explore?>

“I’ll be back in a day or two.”

<Ugh, well at least give li'l old Olivia some love before you go.>

She could be so childish, but I indulged her. I stroked her head and cheeks, much to her delight, then I went back out into town.

I checked for empty shops along the way, but, shocker, there were no vacancies on the main street. Even in the back alleys, there was no space for new construction. Of course, the land obviously belonged to *someone*. The nobles owned most of it, so you had to rent it from them first. My father had a head for this sort of thing, so I decided to consult him about it later.

It was still light when I finished looking, so I headed for the temple where Luna worked. There was a line out the door waiting for her ever-popular attentions. I couldn't help but worry for her.

"I see, so you've felt your stamina decreasing? Let's see if we can do something about that."

One by one, Luna listened to the complaints of the ill and infirm, and restored them to good health. There was just one itty bitty little problem: she'd pass out if she used too much magic. A while ago, I'd surreptitiously asked someone at the temple about it, and they'd said that she could collapse four or five times a day when it was busy.

Eventually, the line died down. Luna took a break, and I brought her a drink.

"Working hard, huh?"

"Sir Noir, I'm so glad to see you."

"You know you're overworking yourself, right? If there's no way to cure your fainting, maybe I could boost your magic somehow."

"Won't that cost you LP?"

"I've got plenty, thanks to you. Please, let me repay you."

"Fine. But let me give you your daily dose first."

Once we were sure no one was watching, Luna wrapped her arms around me.

"I'm sorry…" she said. "I might be a bit sweaty…"

"Don't worry, you're not. You smell wonderful. Like heaven!"

Did that…make me sound perverted? Sometimes, I thought that there was something wrong with me, but Luna just giggled happily, so I guess it didn't matter.

The hug earned me another 100 LP, bringing my total up to 1,900. Now I just had to Get Creative and decide which grade of Increased Magic Capacity to give her. C-Grade would cost me 400 LP and B-Grade was 800. Either way, it would cost another 500 to Bestow it on her.

"Here you go."

Bigger was always better, right? So I gave her B-Grade Increased Magic Capacity. Theoretically, it would mean she wouldn't pass out so often.

"My body feels so much lighter," she said. "You must've used a lot of LP."

"I'll be fine, don't worry about it."

"You always do this, Noir—smile when you're struggling inside. I want to do what I can to pay you back. As your friend—no—as a woman! Come with me!"

"Uh, what?"

Luna grabbed my hand and dragged me into a private room in the temple. The second we got inside, she locked the door.

"Think of me as your personal LP-replenisher."

"Personal LP-replenisher?"

"Yes!" she said. "I'll do anything, Sir Noir. Anything!"

Luna was adorable when she was overexcited like this. And, if she was going to these lengths, then how could I refuse? Because she was half elf, her ears were a little pointed. I nibbled on the tip of one of them.

"A-ahh, what's this?"

She seemed a little shaken, but not like she disliked it. I guess she really had meant she was up for *anything*. I teased her ears for a little while longer, massaging her earlobes. She looked determined to stick with it through to the end.



“Oh…oh no…what is this sensation…?”

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No, not at all—eep?!”

“You like that, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure…what’s gonna happen to me…if you keep doing that…”

I felt strange too, so I stopped. If we carried on like this, I might turn into an absolute monster—especially if I got any closer to Luna’s bashful expression.

“Heh, I see what you want now, Sir Noir.”

“Ha ha…well, this is a little embarrassing.”

It didn’t quite make up for the 1,300 LP I’d spent on that skill, but I couldn’t complain about a healthy 700. We left the temple together and I stopped by a weapon shop on my way home.

“Thinking about upgrading your sword?” Luna asked.

“Nah, I just got this skill that can convert weapons into LP.”

Would I earn more LP from converting weapons, or would it make more sense to convert the money directly? I needed to find out.

“You should come by my house then,” Luna said. “I have a bunch of old practice weapons.”

“That’s lucky! Thanks, Luna.”

I took her up on the offer and we dropped by her house. She had three swords, a spear, and an axe. My money conversion skill had a consistent ratio, but I had no idea how much I’d get from these with my new skill—even something that looked valuable to me might be total garbage LP-wise.

As soon as I activated the skill, the weapons vanished. The swords got me 50, 60, and 70 respectively. The spear was only worth 40, and the axe got me 60. Not exactly what I was hoping for, but then, nothing in this hoard was particularly rare.

“Actually,” Luna said. “What about the spears we used on that dragon?”

“I forgot about those! We don’t need them anymore, so I guess I’ll try.”

I pulled the three dragon-killing spears out of my Pocket Dimension. If we ended up needing one again, I could always make more. For now, I was more interested in how their varying quality impacted the conversion rate of my skill.

Although the spears were identical in construction, they varied from usable to utterly broken. It turned out that did matter, because the worst one only got me 500, the middle one 1,200, and the one in the best condition netted me 1,500. I smiled to myself, excited about how much I’d just earned.

“Can you imagine how much LP I could get from a *really* rare weapon?”

“If I hear about anything like that,” Luna said. “I’ll let you know right away.”

“Thanks. Well, you should get some rest, Luna. Good night.”

I was overjoyed as I made my way home. The item conversion skill had proven more useful than I could have possibly hoped.

Chapter 3:
What Goes Around Comes Around

DINNER WITH THE STARDIAS was never boring. Father often got drunk, cheering and dancing, mother and I had intense conversations, and Alice was always glued to my side. Lately, we'd added Tigerson to the mix, and he always praised my mother's food with enthusiasm.

After eating his fill, Tigerson gave me a meek look. *<It occurs to me that I consume rather a lot.>*

"Of course, someone your size needs a lot of food."

<I just feel that the amount of my consumption is disproportionate to my contribution to the family…>

"If we're playing that game," said my father. "The amount I work is definitely disproportionate to how much I earn—yeaaaah!"

He stripped off his top as he spoke, but the icy glares he got from Alice and my mother convinced him to put it back on.

"But seriously," he said. "My salary is pitifully low…"

"Father, I'm not sure how many times I have to say this, but we are all very much aware of that."

"Could you not smile when you say such cruel things? You wound me."

He looked deflated and started muttering about finding a new job. Apparently, there was no future at his company, and he'd probably get a pay cut next year. It had nothing to do with his performance, either—his boss really was a cheapskate.

"If you wanna quit that bad," I said. "What about starting our own business? I can supply monster parts and things like that. Honestly, I have a ton of them that I haven't been able to move."

I was pretty sure the monsters in the hidden dungeon were unique. At the very least, they weren't local. Presently, the best I could do was sell to the guild, but they never paid very much. It felt like a waste. How much

better off would we be if we could set up shop together? I was sure that golden slime jelly alone would fetch a pretty penny.

“That might not be a terrible idea.”

“I’ll help out, too, dear,” said my mother.

“I found several empty plots while I was walking through town,” I told them. “I’ve got enough money to buy one of them. Could you put in the application, father?”

“Just leave it to me. What kind of shop will it be?”

“Rare items and materials. As for the name…why don’t we all make suggestions?”

Getting the name right was critical. Even the tastiest restaurant couldn’t survive if it was called “Uncle Hairy-Pits’ Fuzzy Wuzzy Cuisine”. We all came up with suggestions, then voted for our favorites. The results were:

Father Knows Best Sundries - Father’s suggestion - 1 vote

My Love to Yours - Mother’s suggestion - 0 votes

Noir and Alice’s Secret Nook - Alice’s suggestion - 1 vote

Stardian Rarities - Tigerson’s suggestion - 3 votes

Hidden Curiosities - Noir’s suggestion - 0 votes

In a shocking turn of events, Tigerson was the winner. He, father, and Alice all voted for their own choice, while my mother and I were both charmed by Stardian Rarities.

“I just like the idea of using our family name,” said mother. “You have excellent taste, Tigey.”

<It would be a shame not to mention your family name somehow.>

“It’s a little depressing that Tigerson is the only one with a good head for names,” I said.

But Alice and my father weren’t having any of it.

“If we *have* to use a name,” Alice said. “I think it should just be Noir and Alice’s—”

“Hold on now. I think ‘secret nook’ has some unsavory implications,” said my father. “You’re worrying me!”

“Oh, Father dearest, considering your age, your lack of linguistic prowess is embarrassing.”

“Urgh! A man’s gotta maintain his youthful charm somehow!”

“Youthful charm is only good enough to get you through your twenties!” Alice protested. “You’re old, now. People want substance! O-or at least that’s what the old lady next door always says.”

“Suuuure she does! I’m *sure* that’s definitely not something *you* said, Alice!”

The atmosphere was getting heated. Father, unable to bear this slight, even started swinging a sword around to prove his manliness.

“I bet I’m stronger than all the other ‘old men’ around he—owww, h-help…”

He fell down and begged for someone to help him up—he must’ve thrown his back. I offered him a shoulder.

“I’m begging you,” I said. “Please don’t injure yourself. You’re not as young as you used to be.”

“Aaah, now even my son is insulting me! I hate this. I used to be strong, I’m telling you!”

“Lately,” I told him. “I’ve realized that strength isn’t just physical. I think strength of heart is more important in the long run.”

That was pretty rich coming from a total coward like me, but my words seemed to resonate with everyone.

“You always did have a way with words, brother dearest.”

“Honey, I think you ought to hone your mental fortitude from now on.”

<*How wonderful, even* you *have room to grow.*>

“Why are you all buying into this slander? I’m not immature!”

Father seemed upset, so I spared him from any further lectures.

The next morning, I walked Alice to school. After all, I couldn't get lazy just because I was on vacation. We were walking along the usual route when Alice's expression suddenly clouded over.

"Again…?"

"Huh? Did I do something?" I asked.

I was a little taken aback at the frustration in her voice.

"Not you, brother. Them."

A group of boys in school uniforms were just ahead of us. I assumed they were her classmates. There were four of them, but only one was carrying anything—a lot of things. Actually, he seemed to be the pack mule for the other three.

"I'm guessing that isn't some sort of new game," I said.

"It's not. The short kid is an exchange student. They always treat him like this."

The kid had blond hair and a handsome face, but he seemed rather timid. His shoulders slumped and he laughed meekly with the others. Alice approached them, so I followed. As soon as she got near, the three bullies all got suddenly polite.

"O-oh, morning, Alice."

It was obvious they had a crush on her. Alice waited a beat, not even looking them in the eye.

"Good morning, Nell," she said. "Those bags look very heavy."

"Oh, um, n-no, it's fine."

"Let me help."

The second Alice reached for one of the bags, the other three boys all jumped to retrieve their belongings.

“Actually, those are ours. Nell begged us to let him carry them.”

“That’s not how it looks to me.”

“R-really? Wait, Alice, don’t tell me this guy with you is your… boyfriend?”

They all stared at me, dripping with hostility. I shook my head—*absolutely* not—but Alice just nodded confidently.

“I can neither confirm nor deny.”

You can’t deny it?! We’re siblings, Alice!

The bullies glared at me, disgusted. Oddly, one of them held out his hand. “So, you’re the boyfriend. Name’s Geth. Nice to meet you.”

They were all smirking. I had a bad feeling, so I used my Discerning Eye on him.

Name: Geth Overtoria

Age: 15

Species: Human

Level: 6

Occupation: Student

Skills: Stone Bullet; Left Hand of Misfortune

Left Hand of Excuse Me, *What*? I hadn’t heard of that one. I used my Editor skill to look into it.

Left Hand of Misfortune: User may voluntarily apply the skill Misfortune to anything they touch with their left hand.

The word “voluntarily” suggested that the effect didn’t happen unconsciously. This Geth kid *definitely* knew what he was doing.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t shake hands with people who bring misfortune to others.”

“Wha—?!” Geth stammered.

“Wha?” I echoed. “Oh, do you need to sit down? You look a little pale.”

“N-no! I don’t even know what you’re…”

“I think you know *exactly* what I mean. Lemme guess, next you’ll try to fire off one of your signature Stone Bullets, right? Be my guest!”

Now that he’d been found out, Geth laughed. He was trying to throw me off!

“Eat this, then!” he shouted.

Pew! Fwack! Guh!

I fired off my own Stone Bullet in kind, knocking his out of the air and hitting him square in the stomach. Geth groaned. Normally, a Stone Bullet was no larger than eight inches, but I’d edited my version of the skill and so I could change its size at will. Mine was roughly twice the size of his. Sure, it used more magical power, but not that much overall.

“Are you okay, Geth?”

Neither of the other boys moved. They must have been afraid of what I would do. While they were all distracted, I took the opportunity to break Geth’s skill—removing the word “Misfortune” from the description. It was pretty expensive, but it was too dangerous to leave such a malicious skill in the hands of an ethically challenged jerk like Geth. I thought about removing Stone Bullet as well, but I took pity on him.

“Gah, ugh, I’ll never use it again. Forgive me…”

I just laughed at his attitudinal one-eighty. Like all bullies, Geth was a coward.

“All right, I’ll let you off. But only because I know that you *can’t* use it again, even if you want to. Also, if you ever do anything to Alice, you’ll be the one who ends up with Misfortune, got it?”

“Pl-please, anything but that!”

Alice and I watched as the boys bolted at full speed. She didn't lift a finger to stop them.

"Am I really that scary?" I asked.

"You look more like an angel to me…or a god. I'm going to start calling you God from now on, brother!"

Alice, don't embarrass me like that. Nell is standing like right there!

Chapter 4:
Leila and the Dangerous Wall

I WAS A LITTLE WORRIED for Nell, so I checked him out with Discerning Eye. His skills were a lot stronger than I'd expected: C-Grade Boxing, C-Grade Hand-to-Hand Combat, Stealthy Step, and Misfortune. It seemed odd that the guy would let himself be bullied, but the worst part was that he'd gotten stuck with Misfortune. Geth had no doubt put it on Nell to torment him.

"Ms. Stardia, th-thank you very much. And your brother, too…" said Nell.

"I'm just glad you weren't hurt," I said. "You seem pretty strong, though. Why didn't you fight back?"

"Um, well…I'm not very good in actual combat, so…"

He really was as timid as he looked. Before I could say anything more, a girl rushed over to us.

"Did you get dragged into some nonsense again, Nell?!"

She was about my age, with beautiful golden hair. She stood in front of Nell as though she was protecting him, glaring at Alice and I.

"I-It's not what it looks like, sis," Nell said. "This is one of my classmates, and her brother."

"Really?! Oh, goodness…I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

Her prompt apology seriously improved my impression of her. She was pretty, and her slender figure probably made her the envy of all the other girls. She wore a boxer's black clothes and gloves.

Name: Leila Overlock

Age: 16

Species: Human

Level: 148

Occupation: Student

Skills: Boxing (Grade A); Kickboxing (Grade A); Hand-to-Hand Combat (Grade B); Stoneskin; Stealthy Step; Demon Fist

H-holy crap! I never imagined someone my age could be so strong…

“Hey, you’re Noir, right?” she asked. “The one who got that insane score on the Hero Academy entrance exam.”

“Yeah—how’d you know about that?”

“I’m at the academy, too! The name’s Leila. My brother and I came from abroad, but we’re studying here, now. I’m in A-Class.”

“Wow, what a coincidence.”

She seemed more than talented enough for S-Class, but that seemed gauche to bring up. Alice and Nell shifted awkwardly. *Right, they have to get to school.*

“Alice, why don’t you walk Nell to school?”

“Very well, shall we be on our way, Nell?”

“O-o-okay!”

“Watch out for any more trouble,” said Leila. “Okay?”

Nell nodded and they headed off. They’d gone maybe half a dozen steps before he fell into a ditch.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?!” Leila pulled him out and sighed. “He’s been horribly unlucky ever since we got here. It’s like the world itself is bullying him. It’s just the two of us here, so I worry about him.”

“Sorry for scaring you, sis…”

Obviously they knew nothing about Nell’s bad luck. I filled them in, explaining my own powers as much as I had to.

“Geth shouldn’t be able to use his Left Hand skill anymore,” I told them. “And I can remove the negative effect from Nell, too.”

In the end, it cost me 500 LP.

“That should do it.”

There weren’t any immediate physical changes, so the fix didn’t feel exactly tangible. I was left encouraging Nell and Alice to get on their way. When we were alone, Leila shook my hand.

“It must have been fate, meeting you here,” she said. “Maybe we’ll see each other at school.”

“I hope so.”



“I wish I could stay and chat, but I’ve got to go to work. Have a nice summer!”

She flashed a brilliant smile and ran off. I watched her long golden hair sway behind her. Suddenly, I felt a seething hatred burning a hole deep into the back of my head. I turned around to find a certain girl standing across the street.

“When did you get here, Emma?!”

“I see you’re trying to cozy up to *yet another* girl,” she said. “I bet you wouldn’t even notice if a boy stole me away, huh? I hate you, Noir!”

“What?! Emma, wait!” I shouted.

Surprisingly, she actually stopped to wait for me to catch up.

“I’ll give you one shot,” she said. “You get *one* shot to find the right words…and maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Picking *exactly* the right words out of the millions in existence would be no mean feat. But I knew Emma, and I knew her heart—even though it was buried deep, deep, deep within her, uh, sizable chest. I knew just what to say.

“Emma, if anyone tried to steal you away, I would be right there to save you. No matter what. Even if it happened on the same day as my father’s funeral!”

“I don’t think your father would be too happy to hear that… Anyway, what if something, like, bad had happened by the time you came to my rescue? Would you think I was…dirty?”

“You could never be dirty to me. And even if you were, I would clean you with one of my skills.”

“That’s not what I—! You’re supposed to say you’d accept me no matter what.”

Emma ran off as fast as she could—and she shouted at me to stop chasing her when I tried to follow. I thought about going after her anyway, but there was no convincing her when she got like this. I just had to give her some time.

I needed some aggressive physical activity to take my mind off things, so I headed to the dungeon. I'd already cleared the seventh floor, so I used Dungeon Elevator to go directly to the eighth. There were a lot of corridors down there. The one in front of me turned left a short way ahead but, before I could see what was on the other side, I heard this weird noise.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Big, loud, crashing. It filled me with a peculiar dread, but the sound wasn't coming toward me, and I didn't think it was a monster.

You can do this, Noir! I kept repeating that to myself as I turned the corner.

"Wait, that's *it?*"

The walls of the room beyond were thumping together. They were high enough to graze the ceiling and were probably a little under two feet thick. On the other side, a normal corridor stretched away. It was a trap to squash anyone who tried to pass through. I tested out a few different spells, but I couldn't break any part of the mechanism. Whatever these walls were made of, it was strong. Maybe it was all about timing? They weren't moving very fast. I was sure that I could make it.

"One, two…"

I waited until the walls moved back and braced myself to sprint. Before I could move, I suddenly had a bad feeling about the whole idea. I hesitated, and it probably saved my life.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

The walls sped up dramatically.

"That was too close for comfort."

If I wasn't a coward, I'd be a pancake by now. Were the walls in this place *alive?* I came up with a plan to throw them off. Creating the skill "Stop" would cost 300 LP, but the big question was how much it would cost to Bestow it.

In the end, it was much less than I anticipated. A mere 200 LP! I guess walls weren't supposed to move in the first place. Of course, it wasn't quite that easy—there were two walls, after all. There was a chance that it might end up costing me double.

I waited until the walls moved back and Bestowed the skill on one of them. It worked like a charm! The wall stopped moving, leaving a space that I could get through.

“Well, good. It should be safe now.”

Kidding.

I pretended to move forward, sticking the very tip of my toe into the open space. I was worried the other wall was just trying to trick me into thinking I’d vanquished my Noir-pancake future.

“Oh, looks safe. Hyup!”

It didn’t seem like a trap, so I quickly rushed past. I had over 3,000 LP left, so I wasn’t concerned yet. I forged on down the corridor. There were no doors or other passages leading off of it, and yet I turned the corner to find myself at a dead end.

But there was one other thing that caught my attention. A sign tacked to the wall…

Chapter 5:
Bad Children Can’t Hide from Meeee!

THE SIGN READ: *Look up.*

I did as I was instructed. There were several brightly colored buttons on the ceiling. What could they possibly do? I couldn’t reach them, even if I jumped. I guess I needed to use magic to push them.

First, I figured I should read the rest of the sign.

Look up. If you choose correctly, the path before you shall open. If you choose incorrectly, great hardship shall befall you. To light the way: strawberry, lobster shell, rose mallow.

Presumably the “light” to show me the way was a hint. Strawberry, lobster shell, rose mallow… The only thing they had in common was their color. The answer had to be red.

“It feels a little easy, but nothing else makes sense. There’s nothing blue or yellow about any of those things.”

I aimed a Stone Bullet at the red button. My heart was pounding. The button was pretty big, so I had no trouble hitting it. Was it really that simple? I prayed I’d chosen well.

“Can’t hide from…”

A low growl echoed from behind the wall. My anxiety spiked. I strained to hear—it seemed to be coming from behind the wall.

“Bad children…”

Bad children? Just as I was trying to figure out what it meant, the wall rumbled and opened up! Ugh. I got the feeling I’d chosen poorly. My hint: the path opened to reveal a monstrous hag holding a gigantic butcher knife.

She was over six feet tall, with two horns sticking out of her forehead, red skin, and bloodshot eyes. For all the wrinkles on her face, she still had a full set of teeth. Her tongue poked out through them to lick her lips.

“Bad children can’t hide from meeee!”

“Eeep!”

Nope! Nope, nope, nope, not today!

I spun around and ran. I could hear her running after me, and I bolted around the corner without looking back. She was right behind me!

“Bad children can’t hide from meeee!”

“Eeeeeeek!”

Driven my pure terror, I dove out of the way just in time to avoid her blade. I struggled back up as fast as I could and, just as she lunged forward, I fired a three-foot Stone Bullet at her feet. Unsurprisingly, it stopped her in her tracks. Buuut it also made her even angrier. She looked like she could kill me with a glare.

“Can you understand me?” I asked.

“The bad boy…can…speak. Bad boy…must punish.”

Gonna take that as a qualified “no.”

I drew my sword and considered my options. It was too soon to use Dungeon Elevator again, and this lady was too fast for me to make a break for the stairs. In short, I had to fight her and win, or I was probably gonna die.

“Wrong choices make bad boys who need to be spanked.”

“How was I wrong?!” I shouted. “What could the answer be other than red?!”

I used my Discerning Eye on her.

Name: Ogre Hag

Level: 200

Skills: Superhuman Strength

Ogre Hag? Level 200?! Oh, great, what a cool day! At least she only had the one skill.

“Punishment,” she muttered, swinging her knife.

I dodged back, and the knife smashed into the floor. Panicking, I caught her next attack with my sword. The force of it threw me back into the wall.

“Oww…”

“And now for your final punishment—”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

I fired a Lightning Strike, electrocuting her, and put as much distance as I could between us while she was still twitching. I’d only survived by a hair. My heart felt like it was about to explode.

Then it hit me: that giant knife wasn’t any regular old weapon. Not only was it almost three feet long, I was sure it had to have some kind of skill. Sure enough, when I analyzed it…

Blade of Divine Punishment (Grade A)

Skills: Sharp Edge, Wolf Killer (Grade A)

It had Sharp Edge, just like my two-edged sword. That had to be what made it so durable. The odd one was Wolf Killer. It would be insanely powerful against lupine monsters. I thanked my lucky stars that I wasn’t a werewolf.

“Bad boys who run will be stopped.”

The hag pulled something out from her robe. It was a…ball? Like the ones kid used for sports: a rubber core wrapped in thread and covered in leather. It was just the right size to fit in her hand, and she threw it at me with all her might.

I thought about catching it with my sword, but it was so quick that all I could do was duck. Sure, some people might call me a chicken, but I was just prioritizing my life.

“Grrrrr!”

“Ngh!”

I lost my balance and the hag came after me. Just as I tried to counter her attack—

Huh?

She sprinted right past me. Was she running? Let me tell you, I felt stupid for even considering it. She was just recovering the ball. Even so, it was odd that she was so frantic to get it back. Maybe there was something special about it? I had to be sure. I activated my Discerning Eye again to check.

Numbing Ball (Grade C)

Skills: Paralysis (Grade C)

Well, duh—it wasn't a toy, it was a weapon. If it hit me, I'd be paralyzed. I had to find a way to counter it. I looked at giving myself C-Grade Paralysis Immunity. The description read: "Increases defense against paralysis. Chance of blocking C-Grade Paralysis attacks." The skill cost 800 LP, and I acquired it without hesitation.

Now at least I could defend against her attack. …But perhaps it could be useful for attack, as well.

"I'm begging you to stop. I haven't done anything bad," I said.

"Then you're a good boy?"

Weirdly enough, that seemed to get through to her. I nodded aggressively.

"Then prove it," she said. "Prove that you are a good boy."

"Prove that I'm a good boy, huh? Like if I were to say, hypothetically, that I helped an old woman cross the road?"

"No, that would not be proof."

"What if I brought the old woman here to prove it? Will you wait for me?"

She didn't respond. I tried backing away, but she just raised her knife.

“If you’re a good boy, you won’t dodge my knife. Let it cleave you. That will prove it.”

“Do you think I’m stupid? That would kill me!”

“Prove you’re a good boy by dying. It’s a win-win.”

“I don’t think I’d win anything! If I have to die, I’d rather be killed by a pretty woman, not a wrinkly old hag like you!”

“Gaaaarh!”

It seemed I’d stepped on a landmine of a comment. The enraged hag howled and hurled the numbing ball at me. I resisted my instinct to duck and held out my arm. When the ball struck it, it definitely hurt. I dropped to one knee and threw back my head.

“A-ahhh, I-I can’t feel…my body…”

“This is what happens to bad boys! I’ll take my time curing you of your misdeeds.” The hag approached me, calm and full of cheer.

“C-cure me? H-how…”

“By cracking your skull open, of course! See?”

She raised her knife with both hands, leaving her chest wide open. I seized the opportunity, lunging forward with my sword. It was one of those rare openings that we adventurers like to call *perfect*.

“Looks like you underestimated me. Who can’t move now, huh? You thought you’d won, didn’t you, pea-brain? But, as you can see, we humans are trickier than that. So…”

I stopped talking. She was, as I mentioned, not exactly moving, and therefore, you know, already dead.

I leveled up, and I got my hands on the hag’s knife and ball to boot. The Blade of Divine Punishment was pretty nice. It was a little too heavy for me, but it was powerful as heck and I wouldn’t have to fear any lupine enemies now. Even the Numbing Ball seemed pretty useful. Considering the hag could hold it without triggering the effect, I guessed that touch alone wasn’t enough to set it off. I checked, and the description suggested the paralysis didn’t work unless the ball inflicted some damage. That must’ve been why the hag was throwing it as hard as she could.

For now, I put the weapons away in my Pocket Dimension and headed deeper in.

Chapter 6:
Safe and Sound Isn’t Always as Safe as It Sounds

FOOLISHLY, I thought the dead end would let me through after that, but it was still sealed shut.

The wall that the hag had hidden behind was shut tight again, but the sign was still there. I just had to make sure to press the right button this time.

Look up. If you choose correctly, the path before you shall open. If you choose incorrectly, great hardship shall befall you. To light the way: strawberry, lobster shell, rose mallow.

A fruit, a fish, and a flower…they didn’t have much in common other than color, and I had recently established that this answer was incorrect, to say the least. I looked again to see if anything else stood out. Maybe it had something to do with the letters?

(S)trawberry, (L)obster shell, (R)ose mallow.

SLR? That didn’t mean much of anything.

“Wait, lemme guess…”

If it wasn’t the first letters, perhaps it was the last ones—yes!

Strawberr(Y), lobster sh(ell), rose mall(ow)—yellow! I guess the color of the three items was just a red herring, pun intended. The letters themselves were the hint. Of course, there was a nonzero chance that I could be wrong again. I steeled myself and fired a stone bullet at the yellow button.

The wall opened with an ominous rumble, but this time the way was clear! I took care as I passed through, just in case.

I inched down the hall, on guard for any more monsters, when I came to a three-way fork in the corridor just ahead. The thing that really caught my attention was the trio of young people arguing there. I stopped and listened carefully. They seemed to be fighting about which path to take.

It was all very strange, so I tried to find out more with Discerning Eye. I snuck closer to read their information, but there was…nothing? A similar thing had happened with Tigerson, but I was surprised that there were *people* I couldn't read. Perhaps the Great Sage would have some answers.

<People who possess the skill Conceal cannot be read by Discerning Eye or magic-imbued items with a Discerning ability.>

Just as I suspected. My only real option was to ask. To be safe, I stayed far enough back to give me some time to react if they turned hostile.

"Um, hello?"

"Oh, a dungeon seeker!"

"Hey, you should listen to me."

"Excuse you, he should listen to *me*."

"Hold on, please keep your distance," I said firmly.

They looked a little confused, but at least they did as I asked. Were they trying to get me to drop my guard?

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"We're an adventuring party, but we don't know which of these three paths to take," a handsome young man answered.

"But this is a hidden dungeon, isn't it?" I asked. "How did you figure out the password?"

They froze. Two of them—a girl, and a man with a thick beard—started laughing.

"Oh, that? We forgot. Ha ha ha ha!"

"Yeah, see, we don't have such good memories."

"O-oh…"

"More importantly, kid, we're splitting up."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean we're taking separate paths. We can't agree which one to choose."

Apparently, they were each going to take the one they thought was right. But that didn't sound right. They were a party, so why would they split up? And they were probably lying about the password, too. I bet they never knew it in the first place. Were they really people at all? There was always the chance they were monsters.

The bearded one stared at me. It was like he could read my mind.

"We're human, don't worry. But since you're here, you should come with me. Name's Huck, and I always prefer to take the easy road in life. I suppose you need a bit of patience to get anywhere, so it can take a long time, but that's just how I am!"

"I'm Auck," said the handsome one. "I love danger. It's hard work, and one screw up and you're dead! But it's the quickest route every time!"

"And I'm Uuck," said the woman. "I have an itch for treasure. I don't care about getting anywhere, I just want the loot!"

Huck, Auck, Uuck? What kind of names were those?

After their strange introductions, they all stepped down different paths and held out their hands.

"Come on, kid. Let's take the safe route."

"Take the exciting path with me!"

"Hey, let's go treasure hunting!"

This was another puzzle, right? Maybe each of these people was like a "button." Sadly, this time I didn't have a hint to guide me. The right answer was probably hidden in their words.

Huck was the safe option, but his path would require patience. Auck was riskier route, but also faster. Finally, Uuck wanted treasure more than the goal. I guessed the "goal" in this case was the stairs down to the ninth floor.

"So, I take it one of you is the right choice, huh?"

"Me! It's me!"

"Obviously I am!"

"I'm the best choice!"

Right, stupid question. This would be between me and my intuition. I wanted to prioritize my safety, so I could rule out Auck right away. It was a straight choice between the safe route and the treasure. If I went with Uuck, I might find something nice, but I also might never find the stairs. After lengthy deliberation, I settled on Huck.

“I look forward to working with you, Huck.”

“Ha ha ha,” Huck laughed. “Thanks for choosing me.”

“So, I just wanna make sure we’re looking for the stairs, right?”

“That we are. Let’s get going, buddy.”

“After you.”

I pretended to drop my guard, but took care to stay one step behind. After all, there was a good chance he could still turn out to be a dangerous monster.

The two of us proceeded carefully, but the halls all looked just the same as before, and no monsters appeared. I was thankful for that, but an hour later I was starting to get tired. Looking at the same halls, stretching on and on forever, was doing nothing for my concentration.

“Huck, don’t you think we’ve been walking for too long?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, I do. We’ve been going forever, and there’s no end in sight.”

“You’re going to throw in the towel after a mere two hours? You really lack patience.”

I was starting to worry I’d made the wrong call.

Three hours later, I tried again.

“Huck! This is *really* taking too long. Where are those stairs?”

“Kid, would you stop with your whining? We’re safe, aren’t we? It’ll be another five or six hours yet.”

“Ugh…”

It was like being in hell. We walked through hall after hall and all of them were exactly the same. Worse, Huck didn’t seem to have any sort of

conversation function. Every time I tried to talk, he just said “yeah” and kept going.

“You can go back if you want—if you can find your way,” Huck said with a mean-spirited smile. “But I’m not stopping. I don’t care how unhappy you are.”

We would probably find the stairs eventually, but it could be five days. Or fifty. There was a limit to how “risk free” I was prepared to be.

“Come on,” said Huck. “Give up and follow me.”

“I draw the line at disrespect.”

“So you’re gonna go all the way back? How you gonna do that, idiot?” Huck asked as he jerked his chin at me.

Yeah, well, enough time had passed since I last used the Dungeon Elevator. I opened a hole in the floor.

“The hell is that…?”

Huck looked perplexed. I returned his earlier chin jerk gesture.

“Oh, you mean this? It’s just a little skill that lets me go back instantly. Byeeee!”

I shot him my smuggest grin and jumped into the hole. The scenery shifted abruptly and I sucked down a breath of forest air. I could have gone back to the first floor, but the seventh meant that I could get back down easily enough. I wanted to have another go at choosing. And besides, Dory was here. Maybe she could give me some comfort first.

Chapter 7:
The Treasure Room Reeks of Danger

DORY SEEMED FINE after everything that had happened the last time we met, which was a relief. While we were chatting, we started playing a game.

"Uh…ngh, Noir, not there."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No…I mean, that spot drives me crazy…ngh! I-I've never felt like this before!"

"All right, I guess I'll do it more then."

"Aaaaaah!"

Dory collapsed in a puddle, and I stopped my assault. I looked down at her panting at my feet and felt a little…strange.

Of course, I would never do anything creepy! We were just having a tickle fight.



“Now it’s my turn.”

“He he he, eh he he…ha ha ha ha! I-I give in!”

She got revenge. This time I was the one who lost it. It was too much! The way things were going, I thought I might just drop dead there and then.

“Your neck is so smooth, Noir!”

“Yours is, too!”

“This is kinda embarrassing!”

“I do wonder what someone would think if they saw us like this.”

It was just as well there was no one there. There was no way I’d come out of that looking good. I had no idea how old Dory was—probably much older than me—but she looked like a kid.

“Oh, will you wait a minute?” Dory asked suddenly.

Before I could answer, she dashed off. Maybe five minutes later, she came back with a huge beaming smile on her face. Really made me want to spoil her, you know?

“I found some treasure a few days ago. I kept it hidden so I could give it to you, Noir.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to go to all that trouble…but thanks, Dory.”

Her sincerity made me smile. She handed over a simple metal cane. It was quite heavy—way too heavy to be gilt wood or anything. I wanted to know if it was something special, so I used Discerning Eye.

Blaze Cane (Grade C)

Skills: Fire

Yesss! I was desperate to try it out, so I swung it toward a patch of bare earth. I wasn’t disappointed. A huge gout of fire roared out of the end of the cane. It was undoubtedly badass, but it seemed a little weak. My Holy Flame ability was much stronger, and I didn’t need to swing a cane to

use it, which also made it inconvenient. That said, it was a gift from Dory, and I loved that.

“I’m sorry it’s not more interesting, Noir.”

“No, it’s great! I’m still happy with it. I mean, it’s a present from you.”

“You can sell it if you want, I don’t mind. So long as it’s useful to you, I’m happy.”

“Dory…”

She was such a good person. If I ever had kids, I wanted them to be just like her.

“Okay, well maybe I could convert it to LP?” I asked.

“Yes! That would be wonderful!”

I already had plenty of cash, but I’d used up quite a lot of LP down on the eighth floor. I gave it a go. The cane vanished instantly, and I earned 1,200 LP. Not half bad! That put me back over 3,600.

“I’ll come back again soon, Dory.”

“I’ll be waiting, Noir.”

We said goodbye, and I made the trek back down to the eighth floor. When I reached the fork, I found that Huck was gone. There was no one standing at the entrance of the righthand path, but the handsome Auck was still waiting in the middle branch, and treasure hunter Uuck was on the left.

“Oh, you came back, huh?” Auck asked. “Why don’t you take a thrilling trip with me?”

“Hey, why don’t we go and look for treasure?” said Uuck.

They were both incredibly enthusiastic. It seemed likely that all three paths would lead me to the stairs eventually, but going with Uuck would probably make it more difficult to find them, and taking Auck’s path would certainly be more dangerous. But then, I could always use the Dungeon Elevator and try again if I needed to. Ultimately, I decided to go with Uuck.

“Yay! That’s the spirit! Let’s go!”

We headed off together, and Auck shot me a frustrated glare.

“You made the right choice picking me,” Uuck said happily. “Huck was totally wrong, wasn’t he?”

“Um, well…yeah. The path was reeeeeeally long. But the real kicker was that he’s a total jerk.”

“That sure sounds like him. He’s a jealous one, and he doesn’t know when to stop.”

“I can’t get along with guys like that,” I said. “My father can’t either. Maybe it runs in the family.”

And yet somehow, despite all that, my father had decided to woo my mother—possibly the most persistent person I’d ever met.

“Auck sucks too,” Uuck said. “He’d betray his own family if it gave him a rush.”

“So why do you even hang out with those two?” I asked.

“……”

Uuck fell curiously silent. The longer I spent with these three, the more convinced I was that they weren’t real people at all—just manifestations created by the dungeon. After all, there was no way a party of *real* adventurers would split up in such a dangerous place. I’d never seen humanoid monsters before, but I was pretty sure that was exactly what these guys were.

“I smell treasure,” said Uuck. Her eyes shone with excitement.

We turned a corner and found a hallway with four doors leading off of it, two on each side.

“Now which do we pick?” asked Uuck. “Let’s start here.”

Uuck opened the closest door and walked straight in. That was far too risky for me. I hung back near the entrance and waited. Who knew what kind of awful trap was on the other side? This was exactly how Olivia had ended up stuck in the dungeon forever.

In the end, I needn’t have worried. There was a single treasure chest in the room and nothing more. Uuck laughed with unsettling delight and dashed toward it.

“C’mere, you juicy treasure chest. Look how big it is! I bet there’s something good inside.”

She was right. It was a simple wooden box, but it was at least five feet square. Even so, I used my Discerning Eye on it, just to be sure.

My heart slammed up into my throat.

“Watch out, Uuck! That’s no regular treasure chest.”

Name: Dark Box

Level: 44

Skills: Prison of Darkness; Three Questions

Chapter 8:
The Treasure Chest of Darkness

I TRIED TO WARN Uuck that the treasure chest was actually a monster in disguise, but she didn't listen. She just kept humming and striding over toward it. I braced myself to save her, but then it occurred to me—if she wasn't human, perhaps it was better to leave her. Before I could decide one way or the other: ktchnk! A latch opened and two, long black arms shot out from the crevice between box and lid.

"Whaaaaa?!"

The arms seized hold of Uuck and dragged her into the box. It was pitch black in there, and she vanished completely. I suppose maybe it led to another dimension? While I stood there stunned, the box slammed back shut.

What should I do? "Attack" was the obvious option, but what would happen to Uuck if I broke it? She was probably trapped in that thing, so I pulled up Editor to investigate.

Prison of Darkness: The ability to pull a target object into subspace.

Changing "ability" to "inability" would cost 5,200 LP—far too much. I could probably have made up the difference by converting items and money, but I wasn't even sure that extreme measure was the right call.

As I wrestled with my options, a voice came from the box.

<Do you wish to save your friend?>

I stumbled back in shock. It could talk?!

"O-of course I do. If you let her go, I won't cause any more trouble."

<Very well, I shall release her if you can answer my questions.>

"Your questions?"

<I will ask three. If you answer them correctly, you win. But get even one wrong, and you must present yourself to me.>

It clearly wanted me in its prison, too, but I didn't think it could reach me from where it was. That was probably why it wanted me to come closer. More importantly: why did a box have such a feminine voice? It was probably best not to ask.

"How can I be sure I can trust you?"

<The terms of this agreement are absolute. If you are victorious, I shall release your friend.>

Best not to take the box's word for it. It was time to have a look at the skill in question.

Three Questions: Terms are set in advance. If the target loses a three-question quiz, they will be forced to comply. If the target wins, the skill holder must uphold their end of the deal.

Welp. Guess the box was telling the truth. In an emergency, I could always remove the phrase "forced to comply" from the skill, but it would cost me a hefty 2,800 LP. But the important thing was, it was definitely an option!

"All right, I'll play. This quiz sounds hard, but I guess I don't have a choice."

<Negotiations are complete. Let the game begin. Question one: do char swim in the Karisen River far north of here? Yes or no.>

I'd *heard* of the Karisen River, but I'd never been. It was a long way away. I was already in trouble, wasn't I?

Eh, not so much.

Great Sage, do char swim in the Karisen River?

<They do.>

"Yes, they do!"

<*Correct,*> said the box. <*Question two: do fire bears live on Euphrix Volcano? Yes or no.*>

I'd never even heard of that volcano, but of course the Great Sage knew the answer. I could feel a tingle of a headache brewing.

"No, they don't!"

<*Tsk, correct.*>

I guess monsters could get frustrated, too.

<*Question three: What type of monster am I? A treasure-chest type? A wooden type? A tentacle type? Answer!*>

Now *that* I was curious about. The obvious answer was treasure-chest type, but it was better to err on the side of caution and ask the Great Sage. These questions weren't difficult, but asking three in a row was really hurting my head. I'd have to lay off any more consulting for a bit.

<*The Dark Box is a mimic type monster.*>

Now that was unfair. What a scumbag move, Dark Box! It gave me three options to throw me off, and none of them were right.

<*You seem stumped,*> said the box. <*How about a hint? Just tell me what you see. I'm not trying to trick you.*>

"Well," I said. "If I believed you, that would make you a treasure chest type…"

The Dark Box smirked. Somehow. Don't ask me.

"Fortunately," I said. "I'm not that stupid. You're a mimic type."

<*H-how…*>

"I have the Great Sage on my side. Now fulfill your end of the bargain."

The box clicked sulkily and its long black hands retrieved Uuck from inside. For reasons I didn't want to think about, Uuck was covered in sticky fluid. She was panting and red in the face.

"D-did something happen?" I asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't think I could, even if I wanted to."

Best not to press her any further. That way only lay danger.

“Anyway,” she said. “You really saved my butt. Let’s get out of here.”

We headed for the door, but I turned back to look at the box.

<*What do you want with me?*> it asked.

“You can’t move,” I said. “Can you? That’s the reason for all this quiz nonsense, right?”

<*I am more than capable of defending myself against your puny attacks. And besides, you won’t gain anything from felling me. You already have what you want. Why don’t you just leave?*>

“Because someone else might come here,” I said. “And you’d just try that evil quiz on them, right? I think their lives are more important than some monster’s.”

I used Magical Fusion to combine Stone Bullet and Holy Flame, and fired off a Holy Flame Stone. It was a useful combo, and I was coming to rely on it. Shockingly, it seemed like the box wasn’t lying about being able to defend itself. It opened its lid and grabbed the flaming stone with black hands.

<*Ow, hot…but I can handle it.*>

“Unfortunately for you, there’s more where that came from.”

I produced a Stone Bullet about a yard in diameter.

Bwam!

The treasure chest was smashed to bits. The roar echoed down the hallway, and I leveled up! I kept that to myself, but I was proud of my surprise attack.

“Hey,” said Uuck. “Get over here, this is incredible!”

She really hadn’t learned anything, had she? She’d already entered the second room. If she was a monster, then this was the dungeon’s doing, but why?

Anyway, I followed her into the second room. It was much the same as the first, but the chest there was open and packed to the brim with coins!

No wonder Uuck was dancing for joy! Gold, silver, and copper, all in incredible quantity. Next to it, there was a lance and a vial of red liquid.

“Look at all this!” said Uuck. “We hit the jackpot.”

“Y-you can say that again.”

There were no monsters or traps to speak of. I checked the treasure to be sure—the money was real. There must have been over ten million rels in there!

“This *is* incredible,” I said. “If we split it between us, that’s five million a piece.”

“I don’t need it,” said Uuck. “You can have it all.”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“I owe you for saving me. Now we’re even.”

“Well, thank you very much!”

I happily stuffed it all into my Pocket Dimension and moved on to investigate the remaining two items.

Piercing Spear (Grade B)

Skills: Piercing

It was a simple design, but its Piercing skill more than made up for it. It might be useful against stone and scaled monsters and the like. As for the vial…

Gale Potion (Grade B)

Skills: Bestows Swift Foot (Duration: 60min)

This room really was a winner!

“All right,” said Uuck. “We’ve just got two rooms left. Keep your spirits up and let’s get moving.”

“Yes ma’am!”

I was very pleased with myself as we moved on.

I hope there’s treasure in the third room too!

Chapter 9:
If It's Too Big, Just Make It Smaller

"I WONDER IF THE ITEMS get rarer the deeper you go," I said, grinning from ear to ear. "This is a hidden dungeon, after all."

It certainly seemed that way so far. Were there some S-Grade items coming in my near future?

Uuck had run off ahead, so I hurried after her. Back in the hallway, I found myself in a bit of trouble. All the doors were shut. I had no idea where she'd gone.

"Uuck? Where are you?"

There were two rooms left unexplored: one on the right and one on the left. I put my ear to each of them to listen for movement, but everything was still. Had she gotten herself stuck in another trap? Anxiously, I opened the door on the left.

"Nothing."

It wasn't just that Uuck wasn't in there, the room was absolutely empty. There was nothing on the floor, just wa—actually, I take that back. There was a hole in one of the walls. I was curious, but I needed to find Uuck first. I closed the door and tried the one on the opposite side. For a moment, I couldn't make sense of what I found.

"So we meet again, he he he."

"Auck?!"

How had he even reached us here? And why did he have a knife to Uuck's neck?

"Don't pretend this is a coincidence," I said. "You followed us, didn't you?"

"Oh, you caught me. Yes, I did follow you."

"Why?" I asked. "And why are you threatening your friend like that?"

“It’s all your fault!” he said. “You didn’t pick me. I got *so* bored! I didn’t have any other choice.”

“Run!” Uuck shouted. “Just leave me and run! He’s not right in the head!”

I guess she had mentioned that. What had she said? That he was the kind of person who’d betray his own family for a thrill? Maybe this was meant to happen if you didn’t pick him, but what was I supposed to do now?

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Nothing, really.”

“What?”

“I told you, I don’t want anything—but aren’t things more *interesting* like this?” he said. “You might get mad, Uuck might get cut…just the thought of it all makes my heart pound!”

Excuse me, come again? Yeah, okay, he was totally unhinged.

“First,” he said. “You should drop your weapons. Any funny business and it’s lights out for her.”

“He’s not going to listen to you!” said Uuck. “Come on, hurry up and —ow?!”

“Shut your mouth.”

Blood dribbled down Uuck’s hand and dripped onto the floor. Auck was grinning like a maniac.

“All right!” I said. “All right, I’ll do what you asked. Please stop.”

I placed my sword on the floor and kicked it over to him.

“I did what you asked, now let her go.”

“Oh no you didn’t, you little liar.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked for *all* of your weapons. I know you have a Pocket Dimension. Give up the rest of them.”

“Huh?!”

Did he have Discerning Eye or something?! He slashed Uuck's hand with the knife again, and I grimaced.

"All right! I'll do it! Stop."

Saving Uuck might not have been a requirement for clearing this part of the dungeon. I suspected I could ignore her and take out Auck, but…I liked her. Monsters or not, they all had unique personalities, and she was suffering.

I sighed, taking the Blade of Divine Punishment, the Piercing Spear, and the Numbing Ball out of my Pocket Dimension and setting them all on the floor.

"Ooh, you sure have some *interesting* items," said Auck. "Now don't get clever and fire off a ranged skill—I'll cut off her head!"

He was clever. I had been thinking about it, but he wasn't going to give me the opening. Even so, I had a plan. There was a reason I'd taken out the Numbing Ball.

"So, tell me, are these all unique?" he asked.

"I do have a few unusual items."

"Spill. If you lie, I'll—"

Yeah, yeah, I know. At least it seemed like he didn't have a Discerning Eye for Items.

"That knife is strong against wolves, and the spear has heightened piercing ability."

"And the ball?"

"It's called a Numbing Ball; it paralyzes opponents."

"Now *that's* interesting. How can you touch it if it numbs on contact?"

"Oh no, the effect only triggers if you hit someone with enough force to inflict damage. Want me to pick it up to prove it?"

"I like that idea. You better not throw it at me."

I nodded, and picked up the ball. *Now here's my chance! I'll just wind up and—yeah right!*

I did have a Throwing skill, but it was only C-Grade and Auck was ready for me. Besides, that kind of frontal attack was hardly the right choice for a hostage situation.

“Looks like you weren’t lying,” he said as I turned the ball over in my hands. “Now, toss it to me. Gently.”

“Got it.”

I did as I was told. Auck caught it handily.

“Interesting. Very interesting! So if I throw this at you, it’ll paralyze you, huh?”

He was making jokes, so it seemed I’d allayed his suspicions. His curiosity was getting the better of him.

The skill Explode would cost 100 LP. If I Bestowed it on myself, I might die, but if I put it on the ball…

It would cost 1,000 LP, and probably destroy the ball in the bargain, but I was out of alternatives. This was no time to hesitate.

Pow!

“Wha?!”

The ball exploded and Auck was frozen in place. I immediately fired a Stone Bullet at that handsome jerk—

Look, I’m not jealous of how handsome he is, okay!

And Auck made a weird groan as he fell. I rushed forward, about to launch another attack, but he was already unconscious.

“Looks like I’m in your debt again,” said Uuck.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s nothing serious. Why don’t we head to the next room?”

We headed back to the remaining room, the one with the small hole in the wall. It was about eight inches up from the floor, and it was tiny—far too tiny to fit through. I lay down on the floor to peer inside and what should I see on the other side? A small room and a set of stairs!

“Ohhh, so that’s where the stairs are.”

“I don’t really care about going down there,” said Uuck. “Why don’t you go on ahead?”

“I want to, but I can’t get through.”

“I’ll break it down. After all, I still owe you, remember?”

Uuck was a woman of her word and immediately set about destroying the wall. After a moment, I joined in. Maybe the Piercing Spear would be useful? But the wall was a lot stronger than I’d anticipated. We threw magic at it, spears, swords, you name it, but the wall wouldn’t budge. I tried Bestowing a skill to destroy it, but that would have required a six-figure sum of LP.

“Looks like we need another option,” I said.

“Not even a child could fit through there! You’d have to be tiny!”

“A door for very small people, huh? Oh!”

A while back, I had flattened Emma’s prodigious chest with a skill. Maybe I could make one that would make me eight inches tall! I looked into it, and the cost was a mere 150 LP. That almost seemed too cheap! It probably varied depending on who you Bestowed it on. I looked up what it would cost to give to Uuck, and it was a whopping five digits!

It did make me wonder, though: could I make myself taller?

Add Four Inches of Height – 10,000 LP

That was a little much. It seemed my days of being tall, dark, and handsome were a ways off. I mean, it’s not like it would do anything for my face. Emma and Lola said I was attractive, but they were probably just being polite.

At any rate, all I needed now was the 150 LP to Bestow the Eight Inch Height skill and then delete it afterward. I was a little nervous about that second part. I wouldn’t know how much it would cost to Edit the skill until after I’d produced it. Just how much would it cost to erase?

“You look concerned,” said Uuck. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Um, well…actually, no.”

“Oh, come on, say it!” she said. “I owe you! Tell me what you need!”

“All right, you asked for it…”

Current LP: 2,580 → 4,600

What happened, you ask? Well, we performed a ceremony to earn LP. When I asked Uuck to fool around, she didn’t even grimace. We held hands and hugged, and then she kissed me, and—

My head might explode if I remember the rest.

“Thank you for that,” I said. “On that note, I shall sally forth to the ninth floor!”

“See ya,” said Uuck. “Try to keep yourself in one piece!”

We said our goodbyes and I transformed myself into a miniature person. I was shocked at how suddenly the world changed around me. Uuck’s shins were like tree trunks! Fortunately, the hole in the wall was very roomy now. I didn’t even need to duck!

Chapter 10:
A Swift Reunion

THE STAIRS ON THE OTHER SIDE were normal-sized, and it was dangerous to stay tiny for too long. If a monster attacked me, I wouldn't stand a chance! Even a child could have wiped me out no problemo.

As for how much it would cost me to remove the skill…? Phew. 1,000 LP. Totally doable. I deleted it and quickly grew back to my regular size. If my father had been here, he would've made some terrible puns. I could just imagine it…

"Oh, my son, you've grown so big and tall! Just like my you-know-what!"

I could almost see the dirty looks Alice and my mother would give him in response.

I was about to start down the stairs when something startled me.

"What? It's flooded!"

The water came all the way to the top of the stairs. It was clean and clear, but it seemed like the ninth floor was completely underwater. There was no way I could explore it with all I'd already done that day, but I had to go down to the ninth floor before I could use the Dungeon Elevator, so I gritted my teeth and waded in.

I could feel my heart thumping, but I had to keep going. I sucked down a breath, and ducked under the water. Bubbles poured out of my mouth. I had to make sure I was at the bottom. Steeling myself, I opened my eyes.

"Burble burble?" Translation: *An ocean?*

It went on forever. The stairs were covered in seaweed and sea anemones. There were even fish swimming about! It was vast and deep, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Light shone down from the surface—was the ceiling lit up?—but I couldn't see the bottom, and I couldn't breathe, either. There was no air at all down here.

“Burble burble?” Translation: *What should I do?*

I could try and hold my breath long enough to reach the bottom, but my lungs were already burning. I couldn’t breathe! Panicking, I used the Dungeon Elevator in the middle of the stairs and dove in, all the way back to the first floor.

“Wah?!”

Finally, I could breathe! But my clothes were completely soaked. I struggled out of the dungeon, sneezing and shivering. Outside, the world was brilliant orange. I had been in there for a long time. I had to hurry home before it got dark.

“Monkeeee!”

“A monster?”

I tensed, but the sound had come from quite far away. Just ahead, a person was being attacked by monsters. They were apes…no, monsters called red monkeys. They were famous for their ferocity, known for destroying village stores and eating people. Just one of them wasn’t difficult to deal with, but they always attacked in groups. There were about fourteen or fifteen of them ahead of me, and they were all focused on one woman.

She had beautiful golden hair that caught in the wind, killer proportions, and an elegant face. It was Leila, Nell’s older sister and a student at the Hero Academy.

“I’ll save—”

Just as I called out, the monsters attacked. They were smart, and three of them surged forward as a group. They came at Leila from all sides, trying to bite her. If they got her neck, it wouldn’t matter how strong she was. She’d be done for.

Was there time to use magic? I held out my hand but, by then, I wasn’t needed. With a woosh of air, Leila unleashed a roundhouse kick and knocked all three monkeys back.

I…I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. She did have A-Grade Kickboxing. Still, it was too early to celebrate. The red monkeys chittered with rage and launched another attack. Leila greeted each and every one of them with her black-gloved fists. I was astonished. Where was all that

power coming from? These were more than mere boxing skills. I opened her Demon Fist skill with Editor.

Demon Fist: Allows magical energy to be concentrated in the user's fists, protecting them and increasing their destructive potential.

Well, that made sense. Her gloves were rare items, too.

Magic Gloves (Grade A)

Skills: Magical Conduit

They could very well have been custom-made to work with that Demon Fist skill. While I examined her equipment, Leila took out all but one of the red monkeys. Even though it had watched Leila eliminate all the others, it really had no fear. It launched itself…straight at me.

"Oh, come on, really?" I asked.

"Monkeeee!"

I was pretty sure it was shouting something like, "Move or I'll kill you!" This was the perfect opportunity to try out one of my new weapons. I whipped out my Piercing Spear and pointed it at the monster. The blade skewered it before its claws could get anywhere near me. There was almost no resistance at all.

"Hyup!"

I threw the creature's body on the ground and sent it on its way to heaven. Or hell, I suppose.

"Are you okay?" Leila ran over to me. "Sorry, I let one get away. Wait, Noir, is that you?!"

"Looks like we meet again, Leila."

"What a coincidence. What are you doing way out here?"

"Just a little adventuring. I'm hunting monsters."

“Oh, you too? Well, I guess I’m finished. Want to head back into town together?”

I nodded. I couldn’t have hoped for more. I helped her collect her spoils and we started walking.

“You really are strong, Noir. I can’t believe you skewered that red monkey with such ease. They’re notorious for their thick hides.”

I couldn’t really take the credit. The spear did most of the work.

“Oh, I can’t even begin to compete with you, Leila. You have such impressive combat skills. Where did you learn to do all that?”

“My parents are famous adventurers where I come from. I’ve trained with them since I was young. They never went easy on me either! They never let me stop, even when my face was smeared with mud!”

Leila smiled. It sounded like she was more grateful than anything. I mean, they had made her strong enough to take on all those monsters.

I was just about to ask more about her homeland when we arrived in town.

“You know,” she said. “You’re really easy to talk to. You seem really kind.”

“Well you’re just so pretty, Leila, I’m thirty percent better behaved in your presence.”

“He he, you’re good. I’d like to get to know you better. Would you mind if I called you my friend?”

“Not at all. By the way, what guild are you in? Odin?”

“No, I’m in Lahmu.”

“Oh…”

Ah well, things could never be *that* perfect. She must’ve guessed what I was thinking.

“Oh, so you’re Odin, right? I only just joined, but I guess we’re in rival guilds, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess we are. Well—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “We can still be friends, can’t we? I’d be really happy if you let Nell join us next time, too.”

“Absolutely.”

It was nice to know our organizational rivalry didn’t change anything—no sour atmosphere, nobody going for anybody else’s throat. We kept chatting as we walked into the town, then prepared to go our separate ways.

“Well, I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, until next time.”

Perhaps the two of us could bridge the gap between our guilds?

“Maybe I’m too much of a dreamer.”

It was dark now, so I hurried home. When I got there, only Alice was there to greet me. Apparently, our parents had gone out shopping with Tigerson.

“Oh, brother dearest, you look exhausted. Come here.”

Alice led me to the sofa and laid my head in her lap. I really was exhausted, and her warmth and kindness were refreshing.

“I am going to clean your ears,” she said.

“You don’t have to.”

“But won’t this help you get stronger?”

I had given in and told her about the LP thing, as I figured it would be easier in the long run. Before I could answer, she had already started.

“Hngh, h-hey, th-that tickles, Alice…”

“Oh, dear brother, you must endure. Your ears are so dirty—ah!”

“Hnn!”

I was making such strange sounds! It was kinda creeping me out, but that wasn’t Alice’s fault. She spent five minutes poking around in my ears. It was kind of embarrassing.

“Wow, brother, you’re so big.”

“A-am I?”

“Yes. You really are. *Massive*, even.”

“You’re…putting an unusual amount of emphasis on that.”

“I don’t think I am?”

“I see your eyes darting around! Now, confess!” I said in a theatrical voice.

I was joking, but Alice turned suddenly serious.

“I heard that boys like it when you tell them that.”

“I dunno who told you that, but you didn’t need to hear it. I’m begging you, please forget that piece of information.”

“Very well. So I was misinformed. I’m very sorry. Would it make you happier if I said you were small? You’re so very small, brother.”

“Uh, I’m not so…”

“You’re teeny-weeny, brother!”

“Stop! Anything but that!”

Alice’s shoulders shook as she giggled. Was she teasing me? I wanted to get back at her, but mother and father returned before I had the chance.

“What’s this talk about big things and small things?” father asked. “If we’re talking about my love for you, it’s huge! Bigger than the entire world!”

“Father, all that is severely undermined by the fact that your fly is down.”

“Uhhhh, I’m just too big, it couldn’t be contained!”

“Ugh.”

We all sighed in unison as my father subjected us to another awful joke. Even Tigerson rolled his eyes.

“You’re really one of us now, Tigerson,” I said.

<Perhaps it was inevitable, Noir. After all, this is the third time today I have been subjected to that line.>

“So, what you’re saying is he left his fly down on purpose to set that joke up? That’s my father all right. How disappointing.”

“Thank you, my second son!” father said, grinning at Tigerson.

<*That was sarcasm.*>

But it fell on deaf ears. Father ran away to the bathroom to fix his fly, and I shook my head.

I had to admit, I was a little jealous of his daring.

Chapter 11:
To the Gala

IT WOULD BE A WHILE before our plan to open a family shop came to fruition, but father was already working hard on it. I'd have to collect as many monster materials and rare items as I could so we had something to sell, but for now, I was struggling to decide what to wear.

"Father, do you have any clothes that are suitable for a high society event?"

Today was the day of the party I'd agreed to go to with Emma. As a baronet's son, I didn't have a lot of experience with these things, and I was, let's say, unenthused, but I had made a promise. So I turned to my father for help.

"I do, technically," my father said. "But I'm not sure it's what you're looking for."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but size couldn't be *too* much of an issue, so I borrowed it anyway. It was a formal black suit, but it was strangely dirty and it smelled…odd.

"Father, how long has this been sitting around?"

"I last wore it several years ago. I think I spilled my drink on it."

"I'll just…buy some new clothes…"

There was no way I could wear this, and I had plenty of time before the gala, so I headed out.

After a little stroll, I met up with Emma.

"Mornin'."

Emma ran over as soon as she saw me. She seemed to be in a good mood.

"Morning, Emma. Turns out I don't have any good clothes for this thing."

"Then let's get some. I'll pick them out for you."

“You’re a lifesaver.”

So we went off in search of a clothing shop that served the nobility. It was a fancy place, located near the part of town where the nobles lived, with a sign outside that read: “We reserve the right to refuse service to the unrefined.”

Enh. I suppose that went with the trade.

The bell rang as we opened the door, and a man with slicked-back hair came out from the back of the shop. I shifted anxiously. Was I even allowed to be in here?

“My my,” said the man. “If it isn’t the Lady Emma.”

“Heya!”

I shouldn’t have been surprised that he knew her. After all, Emma was a wealthy baron’s daughter. Her parents had probably brought her here many times.

“Are we in the market for anything particular today?”

“Not for me. I need a tuxedo that will suit my friend Noir here.”

“Certainly. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir.”

“Yes, er, very good,” I replied nervously.

He immediately took my measurements and had me try on several items. I felt like a doll, being dressed up like this.

“I don’t think this is very me…”

“Oh, perish the thought,” said the shopkeeper. “You are absolutely overflowing with elegance. You wear it wonderfully.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed. “I think you look cool! Formalwear really suits you.”

She was probably just saying that to make me feel better. It…did make me feel better, though. I tried on several more ensembles until I found something that was comfortable as well as attractive.

“How much is this one?”

“That would be three million rels.”

“Th-three million…”

That was, uh, a lot. I was still going to buy it, but it was far beyond what someone like me could normally afford.

“I’m the one who invited you,” said Emma. “Please, put it on my tab.”

“It’s okay, Emma. I might need it again later, so I’ll pay for it.”

I pulled some money out of my Pocket Dimension, and the clerk raised an eyebrow.

“You have a Pocket Dimension?”

“Yup.”

“How wonderful… And how desperately I wish I possessed such a skill. I hear it even slows down the deterioration of anything you place in it. Imagine all the clothes I could store there! For now, I have to make do with the Storage Room skill. It’s far less powerful.”

I looked up the skill he was talking about. It was inexpensive to produce, but it only allowed the user to send items to another area in the same dimension. There, they would continue to deteriorate at the normal rate, and the user couldn’t even use the skill to retrieve them. You had to actually go to wherever you’d put them to get them back.

“Where is yours connected to?” I asked.

“My personal residence. It is rather convenient to send items there directly…but it has filled my home with clothing that I do not particularly need.”

Looking into it, producing the C-Grade Pocket Dimension skill would cost me 400 LP, and Bestowing it on him would be another 200. Presumably, it was so cheap because he already had an affinity with his existing storage skill.

“Um, so if I could, hypothetically, give you a Pocket Dimension skill as a gift, do you think I could have this ensemble…on the house?”

“I would happily do so,” said the shopkeeper. “But I believe that’s quite impossible.”

“Now, this is just between you and me, but it’s not impossible. If you don’t mind a C-Grade version, I can give it to you. You’ll be able to use it right away.”

His eyes sparkled. “That would be *marvelous*!”

I gave him the skill and a brief explanation of how to use it. Within a few minutes, he got it to work.

“A-am I dreaming?” he said.

“Even the C-Grade version gives you a medium-size room.”

“This is wonderful! Thank you so much!”

“So,” I said. “About that tuxedo?”

“Of course! Consider it a gift, Sir Noir! Please, take this bowtie, too.”

I wasn’t going to say no.

“Please do come again,” he said. “I’ll give you a special discount in the future, Sir Noir.”

He really seemed to like me. Next time, I’d have to bring the rest of my family.

We left the shop, and Emma poked me in the cheek.

“You can be shrewd when you want to, huh? I’m happy to see you act so responsibly!”

“What are you, my older sister? We’re the same age, remember?”

“I’m more mature than you.”

She flashed me a pearly white smile. It was pretty cute, and I stuck a finger in her ear to mask my embarrassment. That wiped the smile right off her face. I smirked.

“Ugh. Hey, wait, you must’ve used a lot of LP doing that.”

“Only about 600. I still have about 3,000, it’s fine.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to recover what you lost? I mean, you don’t know what could happen. What a shame! I guess I’ll just have to hug and kiss you.”

“Erm, Emma? I’m right here…”

“Great! So let’s go to the clocktower.”

She grabbed my hand and cheerfully ran off. It was a little forward of her, but of course I didn’t resist. Mood was always the important thing with Emma. We performed many LP-restoration rituals together, and I ended up with over 4,000 LP.

“In the end, all you need is a best friend!” I said, red as an apple.

It was Emma’s favorite phrase, and right now I wholeheartedly agreed.

As the sun started to set, I changed into my tuxedo and we made our way to the gala. It was taking place in a huge, fancy building that the earl hosting the event had built just for this purpose. I wondered how much money he had.

A beautiful blonde couple were standing near the entrance.

“Hey, Noir! It feels like it’s been ages.”

“My how you’ve grown!”

This was Ladan and Romy—Emma’s parents. I’d known them since I was a little kid, although they didn’t look much older than their twenties.

“It really has been too long,” I said. “I’m happy to see that you’re both doing well.”

“No need to be so formal. You wet yourself on my lap when you were small—not many share a bond that close.”

“You were such a bad boy, Noir.”

“I’d…really rather forget that whole incident…”

It would be too easy to get swept down memory lane. We chatted for a while, then went inside. As we climbed the stairs, Ladan leaned over to whisper in my ear.

“Did Emma tell you anything about today?”

“Tell me about what?”

“I’ll…take that as a no.”

“Oh, she did mention there might be dancing, if that’s what you mean.”

“She really didn’t say a word…? What’s a father to do in this situation?”

Ladan was still at a loss when we reached the main hall.

An expensive chandelier hung over the numerous tables, each of them covered in white tablecloths piled high with sumptuous food. The hall was bustling with ladies and gentlemen in fine formalwear, but my attention was drawn to the people lining the walls. They looked more like adventurers, and one of them in particular caught my eye…

Leila…?

Chapter 12:
The Shadow Creeping Through the Gala

LEILA WAS A foreign exchange student, so her presence at the gala was odd to say the least. While I was pondering this, she noticed me and came over to talk.

"Noir, what are you doing here?"

"Emma invited me. Technically, I do qualify as a noble. If only just."

"Oh, right. That's a lovely dress, Emma."

"Hmph."

"Goodness…do you have something against me?"

Emma glared at Leila for a moment, then offered her hand.

"I'm Noir's best friend and partner."

"R-right," Leila stammered. "Glad to see you're so close."

"If you wanna do anything with Noir, you ought to go through me."

"Uh…f-fine. Anyway, could you let go of my hand?"

Apparently Emma's handshake was rather vigorous.

The more I thought about it, the more it felt like Leila shouldn't be here. If nothing else, she was in plainclothes. No wonder she was hiding in a corner where she wouldn't be noticed.

"Didn't you hear?" she said. "We're security. All of us on the team are members of Lahmu."

"Did Earl Bourne hire you?"

"Yes. Apparently, the Phantom is after the Earl's treasure."

"The Phantom?!" Emma's parents cried.

Was everyone really *that* interested in the infamous thief? I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. The Phantom targeted nobles and stole their

riches. His thieving and combat skills were supposed to be legendary. He was certainly the talk of the town.

“We weren’t given many details, but if he’s here, we’ll catch him.”

“I suppose it makes sense to take precautions.”

“I heard a rumor that the Phantom is actually two people,” said Leila. “So the earl assembled the best and brightest from Lahmu. We’ll catch those dirty thieves. You can all rest easy and enjoy the night.”

Leila flashed me a wink and went back to her post. They were supposed to be guarding the earl’s treasure, but the only thing out here was a grandfather clock. It was all a little strange.

Even stranger, Emma’s parents had turned as white as a sheet.

“Are you not feeling well?” I asked.

“So, um, Noir…” said Ladan. “The thing is, this Phantom isn’t just after treasure.”

“Wait, father!” Emma cried out. “You don’t have to tell Noir about that.”

“But, Emma, he needs to know.”

“Just—please wait until after the dance. Please!”

Ladan sighed. “Fine. We’ll do this later.”

It all sounded pretty serious, but Emma just smiled and tried to look like she wasn’t concerned. “There’s nothing to worry about, I promise.”

“You don’t have to pretend, Emma. I can tell when you’re faking a smile.”

“Ugh, I can’t hide anything from you,” she complained. “I promise I’ll tell you after the dance, okay?”

“Fine, fine.”

Besides, thieves worked in the dead of night, and it was still early evening. We had plenty of time. For now, Emma and I set about enjoying the gala.

“Thank you very much for coming. My name is Bourne Lisleat.”

Earl Bourne stood in the middle of the hall, greeting his guests. It may have only been a formality, but the earl soon drew everyone's attention.

"You should all know that I received a warning the other day, from none other than the infamous Phantom."

"N-no way."

"The Phantom, targeting Earl Bourne?"

"Silence, please," said the earl. "Do remain calm. The Phantom appears to be after my prized possession: The Mermaid's Tear. But I am not about to let that crook lay a finger on it."

He introduced Leila and the others, and they bowed formally.

"This is stupid," Emma complained. "Everyone knows that Odin is the best guild."

I nodded vigorously in agreement.

"As you can see," said the earl. "There is no way for a thief to get in, and even should that happen, I've ensured that the Mermaid's Tear will never be found. Ha ha ha!"

The earl's air of confidence quickly put his guests at ease. The Mermaid's Tear was a precious gemstone, but I'd heard it was small enough to hide in your hand. There were so many rooms here, even just finding it would be a massive undertaking.

When he'd finished talking, the gala got underway, and I went to sample the delicious food. There were so many wonderful and delicious morsels on display but, as much as they delighted my tongue, it didn't earn me much LP. If only there were something more unusual on offer…wait, what was that?

"Hey, Emma, am I imagining things, or does that look like a monster's head?"

"Oh that? It's a rare delicacy from one of our neighboring kingdoms—a monster called a fighting bull. They're raised for their meat and fed on the highest quality corn."

"So…you eat that fancy cow's brains?"

“Oh, just give it a try!”

Emma pushed me forward, having a little *too much* fun at my expense. The creature was dead, but there was something unnerving about the way it looked at me. Its skull was cracked open, exposing its brain. I served myself a piece. I was impressed by how white and wrinkly it was. It must have been a pretty intelligent creature. I steeled myself and took a bite.

Munch, munch, gulp.

It had a soft texture, almost like roe. But it was fluffy and had a bit of bounce to it. It wasn’t unpleasant, but the most incredible thing was the taste. It was sweet, kind of like the golden slime jelly, and it got sweeter with each bite. Before I knew it, I’d cleared my plate and gone back for a second helping.

“You look happy,” Emma said.

I checked my LP and grinned. It had earned me 500 LP. Maybe this whole ordeal would be worth it, if just for the food. Of course, the real problem would be talking to the other nobles…and the dancing. I was dreading the dancing.

That’s when it hit me—I’d just earned LP, so why not Get Creative and give myself a Dancing skill?! It was only 200 LP, so I didn’t even hesitate. Now I had nothing to fear, right?

Chapter 13:
Dance Your Heart Out!

WITH MY NEW SKILL in hand, I was ready for the dance, but I would have to wait for a while. There were two unwritten rules at these gala things: everyone was welcome to dance, but only in order of rank. In other words, lowly baronet's son Noir Stardia was at the end of the line.

The musicians struck up a waltz, and the highest-ranking couple took to the floor. The marquess and his wife were in their fifties, but they made for a handsome pair and their footwork was immaculate.

Although it was considered poor form to eat or talk while someone of higher rank was dancing, whispering was generally allowed, and a young man who stood beside Emma and I was doing just that.

"I'm Mike, second son of the Kentoll family. I think you've gotten even prettier since the last time I saw you, Ms. Brightness."

"It has been far too long. I see your silver tongue hasn't lost its shine, Sir Mike."

Emma was the very picture of grace and good manners in everything from her tone to her gestures, but then, she had been attending these events since she was a kid. I had to admit, I was a little jealous of her skill in that department. She seemed different, somehow. Or perhaps I had just never seen this side of her.

"Miss Emma, I hope you will consider keeping me company again? I have come far since last we spoke, and I am quite confident that no other noble suitor could best me."

Now *this* was a familiar song and dance. Boys were always asking Emma out, even just on our way to school.

"Umm, well, I did tell you this before, but…"

"Is there someone else in your heart?"

"Something like that. Oh ho ho ho ho!"

Emma dodged the question with an unnatural laugh, and Mike sighed, finally noticing my presence.

This conversation is dragging on forever. If I was a monster, I could have eaten him by now.

“This must be your…brother?”

“He’s my best friend. The third son of the famous Stardia family.”

I’m sorry Emma, I appreciate the sentiment, but the Stardia family is most definitely not *famous. Infamous, maybe.*

“My apologies. I’m Mike Kentoll, son of Viscount Kentoll.”

“Noir Stardia, son of Baronet Stardia.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of the Stardia family. A baronet you say…” Mike started getting that smug look people always got when they found out they outranked me. “So, what’s a guy like you doing with Miss Emma?” he asked, much less respectful all of a sudden.

“I believe she told you herself, we’re close friends.”

“So you’re not dating? Then I guess you won’t mind if I invite her to dance.”

“You’re welcome to *invite* her.”

That came out more disagreeable than I’d intended, but Mike didn’t seem to notice and immediately asked Emma to dance. She politely turned him down, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Oh, but, Miss Emma, why don’t you dance with me during the viscounts’ turn? Then, when it comes to the barons’ dance, you can go with your friend Nora.”

“My name is Noir, Sir Bike.”

“Need I remind you that my name is Mike? I shall not allow another slight to pass so easily.”

As much as I hated pointless conflict, I couldn’t back down after that.

“Be my guest,” I said. “If you want a fight, let’s do it.”

“Shall we compete to see who can lead Miss Emma more elegantly? Whoever wins more applause from the crowd shall be the winner.”

“Let’s do it.”

“N-Noir,” Emma said. “Are you all right? I thought you weren’t a very good dancer.”

Mike grinned. “Oh, now that’s music to my ears.”

“It’ll be fine,” I told her. “No problem at all.”

“Noooooir…”

Don’t worry, Emma! Although, thinking about it, perhaps the Dancing skill wasn’t going to be enough. I’d have to do more than that to get everyone’s attention. Still, there was no way I was about to let this Mike guy win.

Just then, the marquess finished dancing, and the hall erupted with thunderous applause. Our host, the earl, was dancing next, and the atmosphere in the ballroom was electric. Soon, it was time for the viscounts to take to the floor. Emma and Mike made their way onto the floor along with several other couples.

The musicians began another waltz and the couples began to move across the floor. The ballroom was crowded, but it wasn’t difficult to keep track of Emma. She was beautiful, and her dress flattered her perfectly. Unfortunately, Mike was dancing pretty well. He must have had a lot of experience. I started to worry that I didn’t stand a chance.

When the dance ended, everyone started clapping and cheering, and most of it seemed to be for them. Emma returned to the table, a little out of breath.

“We can do this,” Emma said.

“S-sure. I’ll do my best.”

“I’ve got high expectations, Stardia boy,” said Mike.

I didn’t even grace that with a response. Emma and I walked out onto the dance floor together.

“I’m gonna win,” I said. “I swear.”

Emma clapped me on the shoulder. “You’re so tense, Noir. Relax! We don’t often get a chance to dance together.”

“Yeah, but still.”

“I’m only doing this so I can dance with you,” she said. “I don’t want you staring at Mike the whole time. I am standing right in front of you, Sir Noir.”

Emma flashed that adorable smile, and I felt myself relax.

“I don’t care if you’re bad,” she said. “Or if you trip. Let’s just dance!”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right. Thanks. Let’s get started.”

Right on cue, the musicians started up again. I took Emma’s hand in mine, and we waltzed. I may not have been very good, but I did at least know how to do it. I felt especially light on my feet tonight. I guess it must have been the skill. Emma, at least, seemed pretty surprised.

“Wh-when did you get so good? I think you’re better than me…”

“I picked up a dance skill. Sorry for not saying earlier. At least I won’t get in your way now, so dance your heart out.”

“Okay! Let’s have some fun!”

Time started to move strangely, and the rest of the world bled away. It was like Emma and I were the only ones out there. We came together and broke apart, stretching out our arms and spinning back-to-back, perfectly in step. When the music ended, it was a shock. Emma stared at me, her eyes sparkling. All around us, the crowd erupted with applause. Even the other dancers turned to clap for us. Emma and I joined hands and took a deep bow.

“That was so much fun, Noir.”

“It was, wasn’t it? I’ve always hated dancing, but tonight? It was really good fun.”

“We should do it again sometime,” Emma said.

I’d completely forgotten about Mike until I spotted him again, looking depressed near the table.

“Well, I know when I’ve been beat,” he said. “I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

He gave up without a fight to avoid embarrassing himself further. I wasn’t about to argue with that.

“My, that was incredible,” said Ladan. “When did you become such a good dancer, Noir?”

“Truly,” Romy agreed. “Last time, you fell down *so* many times.”

“I wonder if I can get away with saying something cool like, ‘Growth is part of life.’”

“Of course you can, Noir!” said Ladan. “It’s a good attitude.”

He asked me to dance next, but the thought of being so close to an older man was a little much for me. I changed the subject and dodged the question.

“Actually, Mr. Landan, could you tell me about that thing from earlier? About the Phantom.”

“Oh, that…” His expression darkened suddenly. “The thing is…the Phantom isn’t after the Mermaid’s Tear. A letter arrived at home a few days ago. The thief’s next target…is Emma.”

“Emma? Are you serious?”

Before that could sink in, the lights suddenly went out—plunging the lavish party into complete darkness.

“Eep! What?!” someone shouted.

A ripple of panic spread through the room. Just as utter chaos was about to break out, a young man’s voice boomed down from the ceiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for keeping you waiting. I am the Phantom, and I have come to take what is mine.”

Chapter 14:
The Phantom Takes the Stage

THE PHANTOM TAUNTED US from somewhere up above. Emma and I both had Night Vision, so we looked around for him until we spotted someone on the chandelier, face concealed with a half mask.

"No need to fear!" said the Phantom. "So long as you don't get in my way, that is. Let's all cooperate and it'll be like nothing ever happened—especially you, Earl Bourne."

"Phantom!" cried the earl. "You dirty thief! I won't let you make a fool of me. You'll never get your hands on the Mermaid's Tear!"

It was impressively ferocious, but unfortunately he was shouting in completely the wrong direction.

He's on the other side of the room!

The Phantom stifled a laugh. I hadn't expected him to be so jovial. I tried using my Discerning Eye on him, but he was too far away.

"Members of Lahmu, where are you?!"

"Right here, Earl Bourne."

"R-right," said the earl. "Hurry up and capture him!"

"All right everyone," said the group's leader. "Don't make any careless moves."

Four adventurers, including Leila, took up position under the chandelier. It was impressive, really. None of them had Night Vision, as far as I could tell. They were using their other senses to locate him. Even more surprisingly, they were all over Level 100. The elite of the elite. Their leader readied his broadsword.

"I'm sorry," he told the earl calmly. "But we may have to destroy some of your property."

"I don't care," shouted the earl. "Just catch him!"

He’d barely finished speaking before Lahmu’s leader leapt up onto the chandelier with incredible force.

“Oho, what have we he—?!”

The Phantom didn’t get the chance to finish before the adventurer mowed him down. I guess that’s how top-class adventurers operate. His swordsmanship was impressive, but what struck me more was his utter lack of hesitation. Most people balked before striking to kill another human being.

But things took an unexpected turn. The Phantom laughed, his voice echoing through the dark hall. Then, just before the blade hit him, he vanished.

“He’s…gone?”

“Below you!”

“What?!”

I don’t know how he did it, but the Phantom was under the chandelier now. He stood in the middle of the remaining three adventurers.

“Get him!” shouted their leader.

Leila and the others attacked at once with fists, battle axe, and hammer. Phantom or not, a direct hit from any of those would probably be fatal, but the Phantom used that teleporting trick again and again to get himself out of the way.

“It’s like hitting air…” Leila complained.

“Yeah, same here.”

Perhaps he wasn’t even real. Could he have some kind of skill that allowed him to create illusions of himself?

“Emma, stay close,” I warned. “He’s after more than just the Mermaid’s Tear.”

“Y-yeah, I know. I’ll hold on.”

I pried Emma’s hand from my jacket and gripped it in my own. After all, hadn’t someone said the Phantom was two people? There was no guarantee that someone else wasn’t lurking in the shadows.

“My dear adventurers,” said the Phantom. “I believe you have made a critical misstep. You have left the Mermaid’s Tear unguarded.”

He was standing by the old grandfather clock, where the adventurers had been stationed during the party.

“Dammit. How did he know?”

Leila and her leader lunged for him, but the Phantom gave no indication of trying to escape.

I was only distracted for a moment, but it was long enough. I felt Emma’s hand slip out of mine.

I whipped around. Emma looked like she was about to faint. One of the other noblewomen from the party was beside her—a beautiful woman, perhaps in her late twenties.

“Sorry,” she said. “But she’s mine now.”

“Over my dead body!”

I grabbed hold of Emma’s dress, but the woman planted a surprisingly hard kick on my shin and tore Emma away from me. She threw her over her shoulder and darted toward the exit, dodging through the crowd. Did she really think I’d let her get away?

I gave chase. Behind me, the adventurers’ leader was shouting.

“Leila, Amurru, go after her! You’re dead meat if she gets away!”

“Why do you always have to be so violent?” Leila complained. She gave chase and quickly caught up with me. “Let’s get ’em, Noir.”

“You got it.”

“Who’s this, Leila?” asked the other adventurer.

“My friend, Noir. Noir, this is Amurru.”

We didn’t really have time for introductions. Amurru was muscular, and at a level equivalent to the rest of his high-powered squad from what I’d seen earlier. That’s all I needed to know.

“Don’t mean to be rude,” he told me. “But I’m gonna go on ahead.”

I was sprinting as fast as I could, but Amurru had another gear—but then, the second Phantom was faster than me, too. A gap quickly opened

between us. Leila seemed able to move just as fast.

“Don’t worry about me,” I told her. “Go on.”

“I won’t let them get away,” Leila said.

She and Amurru sped after the noblewoman at inhuman speed. At this rate, I would never catch up. What could I do? There was always Get Creative, but tonight, I had a better idea. I whipped out the Gale Potion from my Pocket Dimension and quickly downed the red liquid. It was bitter as hell, but it gave me Swift Foot, so I couldn’t complain. The effect would last for sixty minutes. That would have to be enough. It had to be. I was already moving faster.

“Noir, where did you hide this ability?” Leila said as I caught up with her.

Amurru raised a quizzical eyebrow. “I’m impressed, but things are about to get harder.”

We sprinted down a street lined with expensive houses. The noblewoman scaled the stone wall ahead of us, then hopped up onto a roof.

“Come on!” Amurru shouted.

He flew up the wall after her and leapt up onto the roof. I could manage the wall, but the jump onto the roof was too much.

“You can hang on to me,” said Leila. “I’ll get you up there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

She scooped me up in her arms and hopped easily across.

“Thank you,” I said. “I mean, it’s kinda wounded my masculine pride, but thank you.”

“Heh, don’t worry your pretty little head about it,” said Leila. “You’ll get to show off, soon.”

She winked, and I shot a smile back at her.

“I’ll get Emma back,” I said. “No matter what.”

“That’s the spirit.”

We sprinted along the roof, then skidded to a halt behind Amurru. The noblewoman was standing right in front of him. Had she always planned on luring us up here?

There was nothing for it now. I braced myself for what was coming.

Chapter 15:
Summoned Warriors

THE ROOFTOP was treacherously sloped, and we had to watch our footing as we faced the second Phantom. Honestly, I was shocked to find that one of the notorious thieves was a woman. She was of pretty average height, with long limbs, a slender face, and thick black hair that fell all the way to her thighs. She could have fit in anywhere, but there was something terrifying about her eyes.

She flashed us a smirk as she glared at us. When she spoke, it was with utter calm. “You lot just don’t know when to quit.”

This wasn’t going to be easy.

“You steal things,” I said. “Not people. Why target Emma?”

“Why, indeed?” she said. “You should ask *him.* I’m told that he saw her on the street and fell madly in love with her.”

“So instead of trying to woo her, he stalked and kidnapped her? That’s pretty lame.”

I was angry, but also trying to ruffle her feathers. Unfortunately, she just laughed at me.

“Ah ha ha! You might be right. He is surprisingly shy. So, what are you going to do? Your love has been stolen from you. Are you her knight in shining armor?”

This was pointless. I took the opportunity to use my Discerning Eye on her instead.

Name: Phan Bertholda

Age: 28

Species: Human

Level: 190

Occupation: Salesperson; Thief

Skills: Dagger Wielding (Grade C); Summoning (Grade B); Throwing (Grade B); Passive Defense; Water Bullet; Lightning Weakness (Grade A)

She really *was* strong. She had about a hundred levels on me, but I'd bested plenty of high-level monsters before. Plus, I had Leila and Amurru this time. What worried me most was her Summoning skill. Ms. Elena had taught us about it in class, mostly to encourage us to avoid making an enemy of anyone who had it. The skill allowed someone to summon contracted demons, high-level spirits, and the like.

"Leila, Amurru, be careful. She has Summoning."

"Oh," said Leila. "You have Discerning Eye, Noir? I should have known not to underestimate you."

"That's going to make this a lot more complicated," Amurru said, looking grim.

Phan seemed a little surprised that I'd read her but quickly regained her composure. "Well, I suppose there's no need to hide anymore. Besides, I'm tired of carrying her."

Phan clapped, and a summoning circle appeared on either side of her. A strange beast came out of the first one. A cheetah, I realized. Not something you saw in these parts. Phan lay Emma down on its back.

"Leave," she ordered it. "And wait a short way away. If something happens to me, take her and run."

The cheetah seemed to understand her words. It took off, leaping onto a roof a short distance away. At least now we could attack without risk of hurting Emma. But the real problem was the other creature she had summoned.

"It's Cerberus…" Leila gulped.

Something cold slithered through the pit of my stomach. A massive three-headed dog had emerged from the second portal. It was jet-black, with ears as pointed as fangs.

Name: Cerberus

Level: 112

Skills: Fire Breath; Wind Breath; Ice Breath

One Breath skill for each head, I assumed.

“I want this over by the time he gets back with the Mermaid’s Tear,” Phan told it. “Go!”

“Grrrr!”

I must have looked like an easy target, because Cerberus attacked without hesitation. It leapt through the air, all three heads full of gnashing teeth. I barely managed to hold it off with my sword.

“Aaaaaahh!”

The real problem was that there were three of those damn heads to keep track of. One of the heads sucked in a great gulp of air. It was preparing a Breath attack! I tried to throw myself out of the way, but the monster’s jaws clamped down on my sword. I couldn’t free it!

“Hah!”

Leila unleashed an uppercut, forcing one of its mouths open. I prepared myself to interrupt the Breath attack, but there was no need. Leila swung nimbly into a back blow, knocking the creature away. Cerberus tumbled off of the roof. It wasn’t dead, but it had to have taken serious damage.

“You really saved my butt!” I said.

Leila grinned. “It was teamwork.”

“Thanks. But, more importantly…”

I shifted my gaze to Amurru and Phan, already engaged in heated battle. Amurru shouted and swung his battle axe like a berserker.

“Let him handle her,” said Leila. “If we try to help, he’ll just accuse us of getting in his way.”

“And in the way of that axe of his, too,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We ran to the edge of the roof and jumped. It was further than I thought, and pain lanced up through my feet as I landed, but I pushed through. But then, I had no choice. Cerberus was already back on his feet, drooling with hunger.

“I hit pretty hard before,” said Leila. “He’s a tough one.”

“Yep, and here comes the Breath attack!”

It took the creature much less time to prepare this time. Before we could react, the middle head unleashed its Breath on us. It was like a hurricane. We couldn’t move, but it wasn’t much more than a powerful wind. Still, one of its other heads was already sucking in air, white clouds of ice crystals snaking from its mouth. It was planning to use the wind to carry Ice Breath toward us!

“Noir, raise your arms to protect yourself!”

“Got it.”

Leila seemed to have some sort of plan. I did as she said and, much to my surprise, she kicked me. I flew through the air and thumped down hard, but at least I was out of range of the wind. Instead, Leila faced the full force of the Ice Breath alone. Frost spidered through her clothes and hair, gleaming on her skin.

“Wow,” I muttered. “That’s…cold…”

I was relieved she was all right, but I didn’t have time to relax. Cerberus lunged toward her, all three sets of jaws snapping.

“I don’t think so!”

I drew the Blade of Divine Punishment out of my Pocket Dimension. I’d known the Ogre Hag’s blade would come in handy! It had Sharp Edge and, more importantly, the A-Grade Wolf Killer skill. And dogs were pretty close to wolves, right? This would definitely work. Okay, it would *probably* work.

Still, the weapon was unfamiliar, and I slashed awkwardly, barely landing a blow on Cerberus’s head as it charged. It was enough. Blood and bone flew in all directions. It was grotesque, and my stance was utter garbage, but it definitely worked.

“Grrr—awoo?!”

With one blow, Cerberus was reduced to a yelping puppy. It collapsed helplessly in a pool of its own blood.

“Leila, are you okay?” I asked.

“Wh-wh-whoa,” she stammered through chattering teeth. “Y-y-you really saved me there”

At least she seemed otherwise unharmed.

“I’ll handle the rest,” I said. “You take it easy.”

Leila shook her head. “I can’t let you do that. Just…give me a second.”

She did a few lunges and squats, like she was warming up before a run. It must have helped, because it was barely a minute before she was almost completely thawed out.

“My hair’s still a little frosty, but oh well. By the way, that knife is incredible. You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“The Blade of Divine Punishment,” I told her. “It has the Wolf Killer skill.”

“Well,” she said. “You sure gave Cerberus some Divine Punishment. Does that make you some kind of god now?”

I laughed and turned my attention back to the roof. The cheetah was still up there, but I couldn’t see Amurru and Phan. I hoped he was doing okay.

Before we could find out, Leila and I stepped back, suddenly startled as something fell from the roof and slammed down on the ground right in front of us.

Chapter 16:
The Phantom Thief and the Phoenix

IT WAS AMURRU. He hit the ground in front of us and didn't get up. Leila rushed over to him. He had taken quite a lot of damage. He was groaning in pain, and his clothes were a mess. Not torn, which I might have expected, but burned. Phan didn't have any fire-based skills so…

"Watch out…she…ngh…"

Amurru stopped moving. Leila checked his pulse.

"He's just unconscious. Come on, this one's ours."

Leila arranged Amurru up against a wall, then scooped me back up in her arms and leapt. A second later, we were once more on the roof.

Phan was still up there, and so was something else. A firebird—a three-foot-tall falcon with feathers of flames. Another summon. I checked to make sure Emma was still safe. Fortunately, the cheetah hadn't run off yet.

"You won't take her so easily," I growled.

Phan threw back her head and laughed. "I would love to see you try and stop me. If you leave now, you might get away with your life."

"Emma is my best friend. I'd rather die."

"Oh, my. What fire, child. Very well. Then I shall meet it with a fire of my own. Take her by force, if you can!"

Of course I would. That was my plan. I had over 4,000 LP, but it wasn't enough to destroy her Summoning skill. Then again, she did have that weakness to lightning. I had a chance—one I'd take. But first, I needed to know what that firebird was capable of.

Name: Firebird

Level: 50

Skills: Wings of Fire; Feathers of Hell

Its level wasn't concerning, but it did have some troubling skills.

"Noir, look out!"

"Whoa!"

Phan fired off a Water Bullet. If Leila hadn't warned me, it would have hit me right in the face. That would have been enough to blind me, and I had no desire to lose my vision in the middle of a battle.

This is not good.

I'd narrowly dodged by ducking, and I tried to straighten up, but the firebird came right for me. It flapped its wings, pelting me with a rain of fiery feathers. There was no time to dodge again. I had to hand it to my enemies—that was some impressive teamwork.

"Haaaah!"

But they weren't the only ones working together. Before I knew it, Leila took out every single burning feather with her fists.

"Nice one, Leila!"

"They're kinda hot," she said. "But they're not as bad as they look!"

"I knew I could depend on you."

She'd saved my backside yet again. I felt a sudden surge of invulnerability. As long as Leila was with me, there was no way we could lose. I fired a Stone Bullet at the firebird, but it was too quick, and I was still too off-balance.

Apparently our opponents wanted to end this quickly, too—before I could attack again, Phan and her summon charged us together. I parried Phan's dagger with the Blade of Divine Punishment.

"Oh, what's that? Can't even save your little friend?"

Her attacks were ferocious and unrelenting. My weapon had more reach, but it didn't seem to make a difference. I probably had her Grade-A Dagger skill to thank for that. If I couldn't think of something fast, I was toast. Gripping the blade in one hand, I fired off a Lightning Strike with the

other. Its range was only nine feet or so, but we were at pretty close quarters.

“Why you little…”

Somehow, I still managed to miss her. At least that got a reaction.

“Dammit!,” she growled. “You can use lightning spells?!”

“Yes,” I said. “And I see you’re scared of them.”

“I’m not going down that easy!”

Phan’s confidence reasserted itself. She realized her weakness didn’t matter, so long as she didn’t get hit. She was right. I had to figure out a way to hit her, but she was so light on her feet. Worse, she always seemed to know exactly what I was about to do.

“I can see right through you,” she said. “You’ll never hit me here.”

“You’re good,” I told her.

She moved deftly out of the nine-foot range of the spell.

“Ah ha ha! Looks like they’re having a close fight too.”

I turned just in time to see the firebird hovering far above Leila, barraging her with Feathers of Hell. She managed to avoid the burning feathers, but the bird escaped into the sky every time she tried to jump at it. Her skills were almost useless against a flying enemy. It would have been better if she were fighting Phan, but the thief would never allow that to happen. She had set this mismatch up on purpose.

“Leila,” I said. “Just focus on avoiding those feathers. Don’t try to land a hit.”

“Got it.”

There was nothing I could Bestow to help her reach the firebird, but maybe I could do something to the bird instead. Something like a Sixty-Pound Weight Increase? The firebird wasn’t that large to begin with, so that seemed like enough to cause significant problems. It cost 1,000 LP, but the choice was a no-brainer.

The firebird squawked in shock and flapped its wings frantically, but it was hopeless. It began to fall.

“What did you do?!” Phan cried out.

“Nothing crazy. Anyone would have a hard time keeping their balance if their weight suddenly increased, right?” I turned my attention to Leila. “Go on! Now’s your chance.”

“I’ve got you this time!”

As the bird plummeted, Leila shot up through the air. She nailed the bird with a powerful uppercut, and it exploded in a cloud of blood and bone.

“She’s a monster…” Phan whispered, genuinely shocked at the power of Leila’s Demon Fist.

I seized the opportunity and fired a Stone Bullet at her feet.

“Ngh?!”

I was close this time. Close enough to throw her off balance, and close enough to give myself an opening. I charged at her with my arms outstretched.

“How’d you like a taste of lightning?”

“I told you,” she said, leaping back out of my range. “I can see right through you!”

But this time, I had her. I used Magical Fusion to combine a salt Water Drop with Lightning Strike, allowing my lightning to fly further, and fired it straight at her. Phan’s eyes went wide as the water flew toward her —and across a greater distance than she’d anticipated. She tried to flee, but I had outwitted her at last.

“Ahhh!” she screamed.

Her face crumpled with anguish. The attack only just grazed her, but with that weakness of hers, it was enough.

“Hah,” she said, collapsing to her knees. “This must be a joke. When I was a child I…was hit by lightning, dammit all to hell, I remember…”

“Maybe,” Leila said. “You should take a break.”

Leila struck Phan right between her shoulder blades. I could almost feel the shockwave from where I was standing.

“Uuuh…”

Phan’s body contorted and spittle dribbled from her lips. She was done, but there was no time to get distracted. I ran, grabbing Phan’s dagger and throwing it as hard as I could. The cheetah was already making a break for it. Fortunately, I hit it square in the hind leg with my C-Grade Throwing skill and the cheetah collapsed, letting Emma fall from its back.

I rushed forward, catching her before she tumbled off the roof.

“Mmn…Noir…”

Emma’s eyes were still closed. She was talking about me in her sleep. I smiled to myself. Emma seemed unharmed, so I didn’t try to wake her. Instead, I set her down gently next to Amurru, then went to help Leila tie up Phan.

There was no way she was getting out of this.

Chapter 17:
You Can’t Fool Me!

I KEPT MY SWORD OUT to make sure we were safe. Emma and Amurru still hadn’t woken up, and Phan was out of it. I suppose she *had* taken a full-force punch from Leila. She would probably be out for a while.

“Your fists really are something.”

“Give yourself some credit,” said Leila. “Thanks so much for the backup! How did you make that bird drop out of the sky?”

“I used a skill to make it heavier.”

“Wow, that’s amazing…you really are superhuman.”

The praise was genuine, but I was pretty sure that was my line. And besides, if I’d taken one of her Demon Fists to the stomach like that, my guts probably would have exploded.

“Would you mind telling me how your skills work?” she asked. “You probably can’t, right? Since we’re in rival guilds.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “I trust you. I’ll tell you about my LP situation.”

I gave her the short version—admittedly a bit longer than what I’d told her when I first helped Nell. It was a little embarrassing, but Leila took the bait.

“So fooling around with girls earns you LP?” she said. “Does it work with anyone?”

“So long as I find them attractive”

“Do you find *me* attractive?” she asked.

My heart pounded against my ribs. “O-of course. You’re very pretty.”

“Well, maybe…a hug would be okay. You know, since you helped me out with the firebird and all. Best make sure you have enough, in case we get in another fight.”

Of course, I was happy to go along with that, but I felt weirdly nervous. Maybe it was because we'd only just met. We wrapped our arms around each other.

"Is this good enough?" she asked. "Or should I squeeze you tighter?"

"That would be nice."

"I guess this is embarrassing for the both of us," she said. "We'll just have to get through it."

"Yeah."



Her hair smelled so nice…

“Sorry, Noir. I’m so sweaty.”

“No, you smell like flowers.”

“Oh, don’t lie,” Leila giggled.

She took it as a joke, but I was telling the truth. She really did smell like flowers.

“Since we’re doing this anyway,” I said. “Could you stroke my head a little…?”

“Well, just a little then.”

It felt nice when she ran her fingers through my hair, especially when they trailed down to rub my back. When I checked, I had already earned 800 LP. I guess I found her more than just a little attractive. By the time she pulled away, I felt much better.

“Aren’t you curious about the other thief?” I asked her.

“I don’t think my team would let him get away, but…”

Phan was pretty strong. It was hard to imagine that her partner wasn’t just as tricky.

“Maybe one of us should stay here,” Leila said. “And the other should go back to see how things are going?”

“I guess it would be hard to carry all three of them,” I admitted.

“I’ll go scout it out. Sorry to leave you alone, but keep guard.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

Keeping Emma safe was my main priority. I watched Leila as she headed off back to the hall, but she hadn’t got far when she stopped in her tracks.

“Sir?”

“Ah, there you are!”

The leader of the Lahmu adventurers came running out of the darkness toward us.

“What happened to the Phantom?” Leila asked.

“We caught him. But some of the others were badly injured. I came to see if you needed help.”

“Heh, no need. Noir and I already defeated the other one.”

Leila presented Phan with a mischievous grin. When the Lahmu leader examined her, the strangest look crossed his face. Surely he knew what Leila’s brute strength was capable of? He shouldn’t have been so taken aback.

That’s when I noticed his ear was pierced.

Did he always have that? The earring had a stone dangling from it. I got curious and used Discerning Eye on him.

Name: Tom Bertholda

Age: 28

Species: Human

Level: 154

Occupation: Salesperson; Thief

Skills: Gravity Manipulation (Grade C)

I struggled to keep my cool. He had the same surname as Phan. They were the same age, and both of them were thieves. What cinched it though, was their names…Phan and Tom. Seemed like they were twins. Who could have known?

At least the only skill he had was Gravity Manipulation. Even though it was only Grade C, it seemed dangerous. Worse, he was a very high level. But how was he disguising himself as Leila’s team leader? He didn’t have Transformation or Disguise, but the illusion was real enough to fool Leila. He even had the voice down! Remembering the earring, I checked it out with Discerning Eye.

Bingo! It was called the Earring of Deception and it had Disguise and Voice Mimicry. Apparently, it allowed him to mimic even his target’s facial expressions. He must have literally stolen the clothes off the Lahmu team leader’s back.

“So all three of them are out cold?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

I watched closely as he approached them to make sure he didn’t run off with Phan. When his back was turned, I took the opportunity to whisper to Leila.

“Don’t say a word, but he’s not who you think he is. Try to break that earring, or snatch it from him. You’ll see.”

“But…I know him.”

“It’s a disguise.”

Leila was at a loss for words. If I hadn’t had Discerning Eye, chances were he would have fooled me too. Tom turned to look at us.

“Is she your friend?” he asked, nodding to Emma.

“Yes.”

“Do you know why she was kidnapped?”

“Allegedly, the thief took a liking to her. Sounds like he’s a massive pervert to me.”

I made sure to get that dig in. He laughed, but I could see the rage in his eyes. He was a lot easier to read than I’d expected. The real question was how to take him by surprise—

“Hah!”

“Huh? Wait? What?”

Before I could figure it out, Leila attacked him. Tom leaned to dodge her massive right hook, but it was a feint. Her real attack was a body blow from the left. Somehow, he managed to dodge that too, but this time it threw him severely off balance.

“You’re up, Noir.”

“You can’t fool me, Tom the thief!” I said, brandishing my sword.

I struck the stone dangling from his ear and sliced clean through the chain. The stone tinked down onto the ground. Tom’s clothing didn’t change, but the rest of him sure did. He was actually pretty handsome.

“I see,” he said. “Well, that’s that, then.”

He drew a sword and counterattacked. Leila and I stepped back almost simultaneously.

“How did you see through my disguise?” Tom asked.

“Why don’t you guess?”

“Don’t tell me, you have a Discerning Eye? How unusual.”

“I’m not letting you take Emma.”

“Sorry to break the news to you,” he said. “But Emma is going to be my wife. I always get what I want. You’ll see.”

Suddenly I felt like something invisible was pressing down on me. It was uncomfortable to say the least. I felt so heavy! The same thing had happened to Leila. Now we were in serious trouble.

“How do you like my Gravity Manipulation?” he asked.

“What the…?”

Leila tried to get out of the range of the spell, but it was impossible. The weight bearing down on us intensified. It was really difficult to move… maybe with a little time, I could get used to it, but we didn’t have that luxury.

“Haaah haaah, that sure is an unusual skill,” I panted. “But it’s not without its drawbacks. You must be getting tired.”

I bet it used up a whole bunch of magic and, with any luck, the C-Grade version wasn’t powerful enough to literally crush us to death. If I could just hold out, maybe we could win this.

“This won’t become a battle of attrition,” said Tom. “If that’s what you’re thinking. I’m not done yet.”

“Ngh, if you’re going to do anything,” I said. “Then start with me—”

“You?”

He raised his sword. With all the gravity forcing me down—and adding power to his strike—there was no way I’d survive the hit.

“I just…have one thing…to say…” I gasped.

“Make it short and I’m all ears.”

“Emma isn’t a thing,” I said. “She’s a person. She has a heart and a mind of her own. Do you really think she’ll marry you?”

Emma was right behind him, and she was starting to come around. I made eye contact with her as I spoke, but Tom just scoffed at me. He was starting to look bored.

“You say that like it’s a problem. You must know that I’m extraordinarily skilled at manipulating people. Even if I can’t manage it on my own, I have plenty of magic tools that will help. Funny thing about thieving, you end up with more than you know what to do with. But that’s enough talk. I’ll grant your wish and finish you first.”

“One last thing,” I said. “You probably shouldn’t talk about trying to manipulate someone when you’re right in front of them.”

Tom cocked his head to the side. When he saw me smirking, he spun around to face Emma, but it was too late for him. She was already within attacking range.

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on Noir!” she shouted.

Emma hit Tom in the back with her signature Wind Strike. He didn’t stand a chance. The spell sent him flying, and the terrible weight pressing down on Leila and I finally lifted.

“Haa haa gah haa…”

I almost felt bad, seeing Tom panting on the floor like that. Almost. Leila dragged him to his feet and got him in an armlock as I clenched my fist.

“I-I’m the *Phantom!*” he cried. “This can’t be!”

“Light’s out! Hah!”

I punched him right in the diaphragm, just like I’d seen Leila do. It seemed like it worked too. My strike felt more powerful. I guess learning by example really works. It knocked Tom out cold. I turned around for Emma, but she was already right behind me, leaping into my arms.

“Noir!”

“Emma, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What about you?”

“Honestly?” I said. “I’m feeling a little beat…”

“Rest! You need rest!”

Including all the summons, I’d been through a lot of fights tonight! I was exhausted. I lay down right there in the street, and Emma pulled my head into her lap. It felt like heaven, let me tell you.

“I was kidnapped,” she said. “Wasn’t I? I remember someone attacking me…I must have been knocked out.”

“Well, you couldn’t have done much about it,” I told her. “It was pitch-black in there.”

“But you came after me!” she said. “That makes me so happy.”

“What kind of monster do you think I am? As if I would let some creepy pervert run off with my best friend.”

“He he he, then I should probably thank you.”

Emma pushed my bangs aside and kissed my forehead. How’s that for proof that no good deed goes unrewarded?

“You must be tired,” she said. “You should rest a while.”

“I think I’ll do just that,” I agreed. “You know, Leila helped a lot. You should thank her, too.”

“All right, you just get some rest.”

Emma and Leila started talking, and the rise and fall of their voices began to lull me to sleep. I watched blearily as Leila picked Tom up and threw him over her shoulder. How did she still have the strength for it, after everything?

She really is something else, I thought.

I felt so heavy again. So tired. I couldn’t resist falling asleep any longer.



Chapter 18:
After the Battle

WHEN I WOKE UP AGAIN, everything had changed. Just how long had I been out?! There were more people gathered in the street around us, including Earl Bourne and the other members of Lahmu.

"Guys," said Emma. "Noir's awake."

"Good morning, Emma. And…everybody else."

"You're name's Noir Stardia, right?" asked Earl Bourne. "I must thank you from the very bottom of my heart for everything you did tonight!"

He shook my hand and even made a show of casually kicking Tom in the process.

"Oh, I really didn't do anything," I said. "Leila and Emma did all the hard work."

"Don't say that!" Emma protested. "I was asleep for most of it. Who knows what would have happened to me if you hadn't been there."

"Yeah," Leila agreed. "I don't think I would have succeeded without Noir's assistance."

The earl beamed at me. "I wish to reward you tomorrow," he said. "Whenever you like. Thanks to you three, the Mermaid's Tear is mine once more."

Apparently they had already retrieved the gemstone. The earl was, obviously, overjoyed.

"We'll take care of the rest," he said. "Feel free to take your leave and get some rest."

"I think I'll do just that."

It was just as well. I don't think my body could take any more. Emma and her parents helped me up. Leila was staying, so we promised to meet up again soon. With that, we set off home.

“I can’t thank you enough for saving Emma,” said Ladan.

“Indeed,” Romy agreed. “You really are her hero, Noir.”

They must have been so worried, but they were smiling now. Emma linked her arm through mine, humming to herself.

“Hmm, hmm, hmm!”

“Someone’s in a good mood,” I said.

“Of course I am! You came to my rescue.”

“What else was I supposed to do? If I got kidnapped, wouldn’t you come after me?”

“Absolutely. I would follow you to hell and back.”

“Well, if that ever happens, I’m counting on you.”

“You got it,” she promised.

When we reached their home, we went our separate ways. I was starting to feel unsteady. It had been a really long night, you know, what with the deadly face-offs against *two* super powerful thieves.

“If only I were stronger…”

Everything had turned out all right in the end, but there was no way I could have won on my own. Without Leila, I couldn’t have taken on Tom, let alone Phan and all of the creatures she summoned. If I was going to protect the people I loved, I had to get stronger, I just had to. After all, my master was the legendary Olivia. I could damn well do better than this.

Those thoughts swarmed in my head right until I opened the door to my house. Greeted with the familiar sights of home, I immediately relaxed.

<Ooh, Noir, you are finally back.>

“Welcome home, brother dearest!”

Alice and Tigerson came to greet me. They both looked absolutely exhausted.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

<Your father is absolutely impossible.>

“He hasn’t been able to find a place for us to set up Stardian Rarities,” said Alice.

“Oh, I see. Well, just leave that to me.”

We walked into the living room to find my father biting a handkerchief in frustration. My mother was trying her best to comfort him, but I couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“Noir, is that you, my boy? Listen, it’s about the shop.”

“Sounds like it’s been giving you a hard time.”

“They keep saying they’ll only sell to *real* nobles! How awful is that?! We *are* real nobles, aren’t we?!”

We weren’t, frankly, but it didn’t seem like the right moment to say so.

“Earl Bourne said he’d give me a reward for my service,” I said. “So I’ll ask him when I see him next.”

“Huh? Reward for your service?”

“Oh, I just caught that Phantom guy tonight. With the help of some friends, of course.”

“Wow…the Phantom? That’s my boy!”

And just like that, my father’s usual good spirits returned. If only I could recover as quickly as he did.

“Anyway,” I said. “I’m pooped. I’m going to bed.”

“Good night, my family treasure!”

I stumbled up to my room, rubbing my eyes, then got changed and crawled into bed.

“Oh no, dear brother, you’ll catch a cold like that.”

“Huh? Alice…?”

I was so tired. I couldn’t really tell what was going on, but Alice put a…blanket over me? No, climbed into bed *beside* me.

“I’ll keep you warm,” she said. “We can’t have you catching a cold!”

I didn’t have the energy to fight her, so I just nodded and closed my eyes. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

When I woke up again, it was light. The birds chirped happily outside my window.

“Mmm, I really needed thaaa—?!”

“Eh he he, good morning.” Alice’s face was right in front of mine. I almost jumped out of my skin.

“You scared me. Why are you so close?”

“So I could watch your adorable face while you slept, brother dearest. It just kept drawing me closer. You’re like a work of art, really.”

Work of art? What? Had she even slept?

Alice giggled and swung out of bed. “It’s already past noon,” she said. “You must’ve been worn out.”

“Yeah, I slept like a log.”

“Lunch is ready,” she said. “Come down when you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

It was all well and good to take things easy over summer break, but I was losing my edge. I couldn’t go sleeping through the day like this! I changed quickly and headed downstairs.

<*Did you rest well, Noir?*> asked Tigerson.

“I did. Thank you.”

<*Are you going out today?*>

“Yeah, after lunch I’ll go and visit the earl.”

I wanted to talk to him about my reward, after all. I ate my fill of Alice’s cooking and headed out to his estate. When I gave my name at the door, the butler welcomed me into the earl’s study.

“Thank you for coming, Noir. I’ve been waiting for you,” said the earl.

“No problem,” I said. “And thank you for everything last night.”

“Oh no, I’m the one who should be thanking you! Please, take a seat.”

The sofa was so soft I could have disappeared into it. It was a world away from the cheap furniture we had at home, but I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Even the tea they served was perfect: fragrant and richly flavored.

“What happened to Phan and Tom?” I asked.

“They’re in jail,” said the earl. “They’ll be punished for their crimes, and they won’t be bothering anyone anymore. They gave the Lahmu adventurers a hard time; I’m impressed you managed to catch them.”

He stared at me warmly. It didn’t feel right to deceive him.

“The thing is,” I said. “I’m not actually very physically strong, but I do have a special power. I can weaken enemies, and stuff like that.”

“How delightful. I believe I desire to hire you as one of my guards from time to time. Of course, you would be paid handsomely for your services.”

“I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I’m already attending the Hero Academy and working as an adventurer. I don’t think I could take on another job.”

“I see,” said the earl. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

That said, a little marketing for my guild wouldn’t hurt. He seemed to favor our rivals, but maybe I could get him to switch sides.

“If you put in a request with Odin,” I said. “I’m sure you’d find many top-class adventurers to assist you!”

“You know,” he said. “That’s not a bad idea. But for now, we should discuss your reward.”

“May I speak frankly?” I said. “I hope I’m not asking too much, but my family wants to start a business selling monster materials and the like. And we’re having so much trouble securing a shop. If you happen to have a plot of land, I would be most grateful if we could rent it from you.”

“A shop? Whereabout?”

“If possible, somewhere in the commerce district.”

There was a lot of foot traffic there, so there'd be no shortage of potential customers.

"I have a building that used to be a restaurant, would that suit you?" the earl asked.

"Would we be allowed to remodel?"

"Of course! I'll cut you a deal on the rent, but you shall have to pay the sales taxes and the like."

"That would be wonderful," I said. "Thank you, Earl Bourne."

"If you ever need assistance," he said. "Please don't hesitate to reach out to me."

With that, he showed me to the building. It was a little off the main street, but it wasn't a bad location. The place was a tad worn out, but I couldn't complain. With permission to remodel, we could turn it into something trendy and inviting.

"The rent is normally two-hundred thousand rels a month but, for you, I'll make it twenty thousand."

"Are you sure?!"

"Of course," said the earl. "But if I'm ever in trouble again, I'm counting on your help. I hope we have a long and fruitful relationship."

"Thank you, and I hope so, too."

This was big news for the Stardia family! That evening, I rushed home to tell everyone the details. They were all delighted, and we stayed up long into the night working out what we wanted to do with the place. Father even got so animated that he stubbed his finger on the table and started sobbing.

Personally, I was just happy that everyone was as excited as I was.

Chapter 19:
Pretty Girl Rice Ball

WE SPENT THE NEXT WEEK remodeling the shop. Father quit his job, so he was there with Tigerson and me every day. Alice and mother joined us whenever they had time, and to my delight, Emma, Luna, and Lola helped out as well.

With everyone's work, the old shop, which had looked like it would fall apart if subjected to a big enough sneeze, was completely transformed. We painted the walls a fresh, clean white, and arranged everything so the customers could easily wander and peruse. We had an impressive counter installed and made sure the floor was even. We even set up displays for our merchandise.

"I hardly recognize the place," Lola said cheerfully, plopping her head on my shoulder. "I can't wait for the grand opening."

"Yeah, it's so clean and stylish," Luna agreed, pushing Lola away. "The women of the city will love this place."

Emma walked around the place, tilting her head. "Hey, Noir, what do you even sell at a 'rarities' shop?"

"Umm, well, monster parts and unusual items and stuff," I said. "Things like golden slime jelly."

"That stuff is delicious! You get that from the dungeon, right?"

"Yeah, there are all sorts of unusual monsters down there. Like, wait. Hang on. I'll show you."

I opened my Pocket Dimension and pulled out a few things—the pelt and fang from a silver wolf, along with the wings and stinger from a golden bee, all of which I'd acquired from my showdown with those awful beasts on the seventh floor. I'd held onto them, and perhaps now they'd be useful.

"Huh, I've never seen monster parts like this," Lola said.

She managed a lot of the guild's material intake, so if she didn't recognize something, the creatures in the hidden dungeon really did have to

be rare.

“What about you, Luna?” I asked. “Seen anything like these before?”

“I haven’t, but I do know a doctor and material appraiser. Maybe I could ask them?”

“I’d appreciate that,” I said. “These things will be easier to sell if we know what they’re useful for. Maybe we can even mark them up a little.”

“Just leave it to me,” Luna said.

Given all this, perhaps it was a good idea to wait a bit before we opened the shop. Then I could take a little more time to collect materials from the dungeon. I was sure the golden slimes would sell well, at least. It was all part of my grand plan: collect a ton of rare materials, turn them into cash, and make the Stardia family rich. As a bonus, I could easily convert any extra money we made into LP.

I didn’t even have to worry about any of the fiddly details. Father was handling all of that. He was even talking about joining a trade guild.

“Oh no,” Emma said suddenly. “It’s already past noon. Noir, we have to get to school.”

“Huh? But we don’t have any classes until the fall.”

“Yeah, but they’re talking about summer camp. We don’t have to go, but it’d be nice to hear about it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. Come on then, let’s go.”

If nothing else, it would be good to see Ms. Elena and everyone in S-Class, so Emma and I hurried off.

When we arrived, everyone was already in their seats, listening intently to Ms. Elena.

“Noir, Emma, nice to see you. Are you two thinking about joining us at the hot springs?”

“That we are!” Emma said. “We love hot springs!”

She’d loved bathing ever since we were kids. We always used to go bathing together when we were small, although it probably wasn’t appropriate now.

“Um, ahem. Well, everyone’s here,” said Ms. Elena. “So let’s go over everything. These hot springs are famous for their skin-beautifying properties.”

All the girls’ eyes sparkled at that.

“Now I know a hot springs camp sounds nice, but there are powerful monsters in the area, and crafty pixies, too. If you’re not confident in your abilities, you should stay behind.”

Apparently, participation wasn’t compulsory, but judging by how excited Emma was, she and I were definitely going.

“Raise your hand if you’re interested.”

Everyone’s hands shot up. I couldn’t understand it. I guess the girls were interested in the springs, but what about the guys? Some of them were whispering near me, and I listened in.

“He he he, it’s an open-air bath.”

“Eh he he, we should be able to get a good look.”

Uuuugh, *gross*. I felt a chill down my spine—didn’t they think of anything else?!

“So, everyone’s coming?” said Ms. Elena. “Great. We leave in a week, so be ready.”

When class was dismissed, I went to join Emma. I could feel the boys all staring at her, undressing her and the other girls with their eyes.

“Eh he he he, I can’t wait to see Emma.”

“I know! They’re so massive! He he he.”

Welp. Apparently I’d be spending my camp trip playing bodyguard. We headed outside together while I chewed this over.

“What if we don’t go?” I said. “What if we go somewhere else instead? Just us.”

“What?! No! We’re going, Noir.”

I sighed. “I figured.”

“I mean, you know how much I love hot springs.”

“I know,” I said. “But all those horny boys from our class will be there. They’ll be watching you and the other girls like hawks.”

“Oh, you mean they’re going to peep on us?” Emma frowned. “Well, I’m not happy about that, either, but…I really want to go.”

Oof, when she said things like that in that thoughtful but hesitant tone, there was no changing her mind.

“And anyway,” she said. “The worst they can do is look, right? Eh he he…”

“That’s still pretty bad!”

“I-I was joking. I know you’ll stop them, Noir.”

“Yeah. I was planning to.”

“Well, good. I’m counting on you!”

Emma threw me a thumbs-up. If you ask me, she seemed a little *too* unconcerned, but then, she was a terminal optimist. I’d just have to be that much more careful. Maybe I could talk to Ms. Elena about it on the way there.

“I guess we should head home,” I said.

“Sorry, I’m actually in a bit of a hurry. I’m going on a family trip for a few days.”

“Oh, where to?”

“Close to the beach,” Emma said. “It’s been so hot lately. Wanna come?”

“Nah, I have the shop to worry about. I hope you have fun, though.”

“I will. And you better not cheat on me while I’m gone!”

Emma gave me a goodbye hug and pecked me on the cheek before running off home. I’d hoped she’d help me earn LP over the next few days, but I guess I needed a new plan. At least I’d got some just now.

I returned to the shop to find Lola and Luna arguing in front of a painting. To be honest, they were a little scary when they got like this. The painting was a portrait of Lola. She must have commissioned someone to make it.

“It’s perfect for this spot! I know Noir will agree!”

“Oh, I don’t think so. Sir Noir does not want you staring at him all day.”

“You can’t talk to me like that! You know, Noir and I have a connection from a past life.”

“Where’s your proof?”

“I felt a tingle when I first met him.”

“You’re such a liar. I know you treated Sir Noir like a fool when you first met.”

“Well, that was…um…”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

The two of them turned on me and demanded my opinion on the painting.

“Umm,” I said. “So, it’s my father who’ll probably be working the counter most of the time. Lola, the idea of having your portrait watching over him is a little…”

“I withdraw my suggestion!” Lola cried.

She tore the painting off the wall and handed it to me instead.

“You should hang it in your room, Sir Noir.”

“Uh, thank you?”

“I know,” said Lola. “Why don’t we go shopping? Just the two of us.”

“I’ll come!” Luna cut in.

They knew each other pretty well, so maybe that was why they fought like this?

“Shopping would be nice,” I said. “But I have a favor to ask first. After what happened with the Phantom, I’ve been really wanting to get stronger. But I need LP to do that, so…”

It was awkward asking them directly for their help, given it meant fooling around with me. Thankfully, they both knew what I was talking

about.

“Leave it to me,” said Lola. “You know me, Noir. I’d give you the clothes off my back and be naked as the day I was born.”

“I’m…not really sure that’s how that phrase works, Lola.”

“I’ll help, too!” Luna cut in. “I want to be of use, Sir Noir.”

“I appreciate it. Really, I do. Um, so, what should we do?”

I hadn’t really thought this through, but at least we were the only ones in the shop. If we were going to do something, now was a good time.

“What if you and I share an ‘adult’ kiss, Mr. Noir?” Lola asked.

“Rejected.”

“I wasn’t asking you, Luna.”

“Well I still reject the idea! Sir Noir, let’s hold hands and hug and…”

“You can’t do that!” said Lola. “This isn’t about what *you* want, Luna.”

“Of course it isn’t, I’m doing this for Sir Noir.”

If I didn’t think of something soon, they were going to keep fighting like this. That’s when I noticed the rice balls on the table. They must have had them for lunch. Strangely, the sight of them inspired me.

“I want pretty girl…rice balls.”

“What?”

“Would you make a pretty girl rice ball for me?” I asked.

“Um, do you have any idea what he’s talking about, Luna?”

“I’ve…never heard of such a thing.”

Of course she hadn’t. I’d only just come up with it! This was embarrassing, but I had to deal with it if I wanted to get stronger.

“I mean like…make a human rice ball. I’d be the stuffing, and you two are the rice.”

“So you want us to wrap you up?” Lola asked.

“Like a group hug?” said Luna.

“Yeah, something like that. I-I don’t know…this is stupid. You don’t have to—”

“I’ll do it!” Lola shouted. “I’ll take the front!”

“Oh, come on!” Luna sighed. “Hmph, fine…I’ll take the back.”

My pulse began to race. Lola came to stand in front of me, and Luna moved behind. Slowly, they closed in on me. I felt like my heart might explode.

“There!”

They wrapped me in their arms, squishing me between them. They were so soft and tender—it didn’t hurt at all. I’d never felt anything like it before! I could feel these two beauties pressing against my whole body. How warm they were… the feeling of their breath on my skin…

“Whooo…”

“L-Lola,” I said. “Are you blowing on me on purpose?”

“Of course not, whooooo…”

Before I could ask her to stop blowing in my ear, Lola started doing the same thing on the other side.

“Sir Noir, I’m just getting you back for last time.”

“Ahhh!”

Not satisfied with just blowing, Luna nibbled on my earlobe. She must still have been thinking about when I did it to her, because she really got into it! She tormented me until my knees shook.

But you know what? I was grateful for the affection.

In the end, I earned 3,000 LP, so I guess my stupid idea was surprisingly effective after all!

Chapter 20:
Fun with a Bonefish

IF I COULD GET MORE POWERFUL, I could protect the people I loved. Even so, I was still fundamentally a coward, and I needed to find a way of leveling up that didn't put my life on the line. That was why I was focused on earning LP.

When I woke up the next morning, I knocked on Alice's door and asked for a hug.

"Good morning."

"G-good morning," she said. "You're being quite proactive this morning, brother."

"I figure I should learn to be a little bolder."

"Amazing! Then you'll be everyone's hero!"

I wasn't sure about that, but I needed to build up LP, so I headed downstairs to give mother a hug, pet Tigerson, and ignore father. Just as I was thinking about going to the dungeon, my father piped up.

"By the way, a blonde girl came looking for you this morning."

"What was her name?"

"I didn't get the chance to ask," he said. "She left as soon as I said you were still asleep. She said she'd be back, though!"

That sounded like Leila to me.

"Good morning."

Speak of the devil! I hurriedly fixed my bedhead when I heard her call from the front door.

"So it *was* you," I said.

And she had her little brother Nell with her.

"Sorry for dropping by unannounced. Nell told me where you lived and I wanted to pop by."

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” I said. “It’s not a huge house, but please come in.”

“I can’t,” said Leila. “I have to get to work. But I wanted to thank you again.”

Was this about the Phantom? If so, then I should have been the one thanking her! But this was about something else.

“For what you did for my Nell, I mean,” she said. “Nothing bad has happened since you helped him. I wasn’t sure about the whole Misfortune skill thing, but whatever you did, it really worked!”

I guess without the Misfortune skill, Nell was back to normal. He smiled and lowered his head.

“Thank you very much.”

“I’m just glad to hear you’re doing well,” I said. “And don’t worry about Geth, he won’t be able to pull that move on anybody anymore.”

“Ugh, I just…” Nell said. “No one’s been this nice to us since we arrived…”

“Anyway,” said Leila, her voice catching in her throat. “I wanted to do something to thank you.”

Now that she mentioned it, I did have an idea.

“It doesn’t have to be on a strict schedule or anything,” I said. “But would you train me to fight?”

“Absolutely! I know we’re in rival guilds, but…I want us to be good friends.”

“Yes,” Nell said. “The two of you should definitely be friends.”

How can I say no to that?

Once they left, I headed into town to buy a spear. They were expensive, but it was necessary. Once I had what I needed, I set out for the hidden dungeon and set about hunting some golden slimes.

“I guess I got them all.”

“Raaar!”

“Whoa?!”

I leapt backwards as acid splashed down from the ceiling. It was surprised to discover one clinging up there. I guess it was smarter than the others. Different monsters appeared down here from time to time, like the boss-version I had encountered the other week. Either way, I took this one out with a Lightning Strike and stowed it away in my Pocket Dimension. Then it was on to the second floor to see Olivia.

<Eeeeeek! Noooo!>

My master seemed to be having another of her moments. I turned right around to leave.

<Nooo, stay, please! You aren't allowed to leave meee!>

"Master, you seem to be a little more…excitable than usual today."

<It's because I never see you, Noir! It's making me crazy!>

I thought she was probably a little crazy to begin with, but I kept that to myself.

"I need some advice," I said instead. "The ninth floor is full of water."

<So just give yourself gills.>

Could I do that? I looked into it, but she must have been messing with me…it would cost 30 million LP!

"That's way too expensive!"

<Ah ha ha ha! Well, you wouldn't really be human anymore then, would you?!>

"I'm serious," I said. "I'm opening a shop. I need to get down there for materials."

<Oh, so the shop idea's working out, huh? All right. I'd recommend a combo of Diving and Zero Breathing.>

Diving was 500 LP and Zero Breathing was 1,000, but I had over 7,000 at the moment, so that wasn't a problem. With those, I'd not only swim better but hold my breath underwater for longer, too.

<By the way, how long can you hold your breath normally?>

"About two minutes…maybe three."

<With those skills, you should be able to manage at least twenty, but don't push yourself too hard.>

That was way more helpful than I'd expected. I acquired them without hesitation.

<By the way, you should know that the great Olivia can stay under for two whole hours.>

"You really are a monster, huh?"

<What a rude thing to say to a beautiful woman. So are you going to try it out, or what?>

"That's my master, you know me well. I'll be off, then!"

<Good luck!>

I took the Dungeon Elevator down to the ninth floor and was suddenly surrounded by water. It was a bit of a worry, but I didn't feel out of breath at all. It was actually quite comfortable. Still, like Olivia said, it would be best not to push it.

First, I made sure I knew where to find the stairs back up. I couldn't use the Dungeon Elevator again for a whole hour, so I'd have to come back to them when I needed air in twenty minutes. Still, the water was beautiful, and there were a ton of fish.

"Burbble burbble burbble?!" Translation: *What the heck is that?!*

A strange fish with a red head, blue body, and yellow tail swam past. Before it could get away, I pulled out my new spear and stabbed it. It was surprisingly easy. I tried catching a few others but, unsurprisingly, they all swam off.

The water was so deep! The further I went, the harder it was to see. It made me a little nervous, so I kept close to the stairs. Thanks to my newly acquired Diving skill, it was easy to get around.

"Huh?"

One fish in the distance was nothing but bones! It was probably about a foot long and just swimming along like all the others. Then it turned toward me. I saw it had fangs in its mouth…its *open* mouth…

Was it trying to eat me? It didn’t look too strong, but I used Discerning Eye to be sure. A Level 12 Bonefish with no skills of note. I tried stabbing it with my harpoon, but it dodged. It was pretty nimble! I lost track of it for a moment until—chomp!

It sank its teeth into my backside. It hurt, but not too much. I grabbed it in my hands and snapped it clean in two. It was a pretty anticlimactic victory. The fish was dead, but it was pretty unusual, so I decided to hold on to it. I wasn’t feeling out of breath, but I headed back to the stairs for a moment.

“Haa haa haa…”

I took a few moments to catch my breath. My clothes were heavy and soaked. Since there didn’t seem to be any particularly powerful enemies, I decided to go a little deeper. Maybe I’d find some treasure, or another set of stairs. Then again, from experience, I had a feeling it wouldn’t be so easy!

Chapter 21:
Dog Beam

I WAS GETTING THE HANG OF this whole diving thing, so after catching my breath, I went back in. I collected some more fish as I went—even a creepy one with a strangely human face. The bonefish, and some things that look like sea snakes, got in my way now and again, but they weren't too much trouble.

I was more concerned about how I'd handle any stronger monsters lurking down here. There was no way I could use Lightning Strike or Holy Flame under water, after all. Stone Bullet was still an option, but the water would probably slow it down quite a lot. I didn't have a lot of options.

"Let's try going deeper."

The deeper I went, the darker it got. By the time I was a hundred feet down, it was almost pitch-black but, thanks to my Night Vision, I could see the bottom. There were a lot of rocks and seaweed down there—A-Grade red kombu and B-Grade blue wakame. They both had different properties—and nutritional value—so I harvested as much of them as I could. Once I'd stuffed them into my Pocket Dimension, I prepared to head back.

What's that…?

A huge school of tiny fish swam past. I had a bad feeling about this, so I hid myself behind a rock and it was just as well I did. A moment later, a giant shark swam by. I didn't stand a chance against something like that, so I hurried to find the stairs back up.

Before I could find them, I discovered a giant octopus. It was a monster, apparently called a King Octopus. It was Level 48 and had two skills: Suction Cup and Octopus Ink. I was much more powerful, but then again, I couldn't use most of my skills down here, so it was probably best to avoid it. I was just about to go around when I noticed something strange—some kind of button in the middle of a reef, and what looked like a metal hatch set into the seabed.

Did it lead down to the tenth floor? I needed to find out. I waited to see if the octopus would move on, but it stayed exactly where it was, so I tried to avoid it instead. If it chased me, maybe I could dodge around it and find a way to press the button—but the creature didn't react. It just stared at me. Maybe I wasn't enough of a threat to provoke it?

I got that weird unsettling feeling again, so I turned around, then I quickly hid behind a rock. That shark was coming back again. It wasn't a monster, just a regular shark, but it was still dangerous.

Oh.

As I watched, the shark and King Octopus attacked each other.

Yeah! Fight! Fight! I was cheering them on, but quickly lost track as the octopus spewed out a cloud of ink. It took a few minutes for the water to clear again. When it did, I got a shock.

It caught the shark?!

That shark was tangled in the octopus's tentacles. It was probably already dead. Once those suckers got a hold of something, it was done for. It was already eating the shark. There was no way I could get past the octopus without defeating it, so I started thinking of what I could do.

Octopus Killer (Grade C) – 500 LP

Octopus Killer (Grade B) – 800 LP

Octopus Killer (Grade A) – 1,500 LP

Octopus Killer (Grade S) – 2,500 LP

I wanted the S-Grade version, but what to Bestow it on? My only real option was the spear. The spear had high affinity with the skill, so it only cost an extra 200 LP. I went ahead and powered it up.

There, a perfect octopus-killing weapon.

I swam around behind the octopus. It was alert, even while chowing down on the shark. If it used its ink attack, I'd have to retreat fast. I inched forward slowly…very slowly…until the octopus stretched out one of its tentacles.

Take that!

I stabbed the tentacle with my harpoon and the monster reacted violently, thrashing around and letting go of the shark. I must have dealt it some serious damage. I guess that's an S-Grade skill for you. It was tempting to go all-out, but better to be prudent.

Whoomph!

The King Octopus unleashed its ink attack, and I quickly swam away. As I'd suspected, it didn't chase me very far. When it gave up, I crept toward it again, but I was starting to run out of air. I needed to finish this quickly.

Several tentacles shot out at once, and I attacked with my harpoon. The monster flailed and squirmed about, but this time I got closer and thrust my harpoon straight through its head. And, just like that, it was over.

I swam down to the metal sheet, quickly pushed the button and, just as I'd expected, the hatch opened up to reveal a room. The water rushed in and sucked me right down with it.

"Ahh…"

I smacked hard into the floor. Above me, the hatch slammed shut again and the water stopped pouring in. I guess it had to, or the whole tenth floor would flood.

I was surrounded by the dungeon's familiar-looking hallways again. One of them stretched out straight in front and took a right a short way ahead. The walls down here looked like metal—smooth and clean. I couldn't see any enemies, so I took off my clothes and wrung them out while I caught my breath. Then I waited until I could use Dungeon Elevator again.

My clothes still weren't dry, so I just left my shirt off and pressed on. Was I turning into a nudist now? I followed the hall to the end. Around the corner, a strange stone dog stood in the middle of the corridor. Its mouth was wide open, and I had a strange feeling about it. Time for my old friend Discerning Eye!

Name: Stone Dog

Level: 200

Skills: Red Particle Beam

"A monster?"

It wasn't moving, but particles of red light swirled around its mouth. Before it could fire off its beam attack, I hurried back the way I'd come. I was so sure I would make it, but I absolutely did not. A thin beam of red light shot after me at incredible speed. I dove to the floor, barely managing to dodge. The beam scoured down the metal walls. There was no way I wanted to be on the receiving end of that!

It was only a matter of time until the creature attacked again, so I crawled along the floor until I reached the bend in the hall. I had escaped… somehow. Unfortunately, the sole of my shoe wasn't so lucky.

"It's melted. How terrifying."

That beam really was something. It wasn't exactly rapid fire, but the shots came often enough. There was no way I could get past without armor or a shield of some sort. Seemed like this was the end of the line for now. I used my Dungeon Elevator to return to my master, and she howled with delight when she saw me.

<Oh no, how dare you try to creep into the lovely Olivia's bedroom in such a state!>

"Give me a break. My clothes got soaked!"

Admittedly, it wasn't a good look, standing there half-naked. My clothes were still all wet and gross, but I put them back on anyway.

<Why don't you just give yourself a skill to dry them off?>

"Because I'm down to 3,000 LP and, unlike a certain legendary adventurer, I don't have an endless supply."

<Oh, right. That reminds me! I thought of some ways to get you a ton of LP!>

"Well, that's unusually considerate of you."

<Careful, don't cut yourself with that sharp tongue of yours. Well, I guess some of the ideas were a little silly, like touching butts together or

doing a bridal carry/kiss combo. It probably sounds stupid. Ah ha ha ha!>

I mean, considering my pretty girl rice ball idea, it didn't sound *that* stupid. And I'd received a ton of LP from that, so I should at least hear her out.

"Why don't you tell me?"

<Oh, you're interested enough to take out a notebook? Are you really planning on trying them?>

"It's just for reference, that's all."

<You're a closet perv, I knew it. Fine then, I'll tell you.>

It turned out that my imagination could never compete with my master's. She went on to describe all sorts of ways to fool around that I never would have thought of. I took care to write them all down.

"I think this will be useful. I'll be back."

<I'll come up with some even more salacious ideas in the meantime. Bye!>

By the time I got back into town, it was already dark. I soaked up the majestic night sky and hurried to the armorer's on my way home. There was something I needed to do.

Of course, weapons shops carried armor and shields, but the stuff you could get from a specialist was…well, special. I went to the best shield shop in town and set about checking out their stock. The prices varied wildly, from tens of thousands to hundreds of millions of rels. The best ones came with several skills attached. There were shields that could reflect magic and others that could restore your stamina with a touch. I inspected them all carefully.

"Anything I can help you with?" asked the bearded shopkeeper.

"Perhaps," I said. "I'm interested in a shield."

"I would recommend this one."

It was small, round, and bronze. I examined it, but the cost was five million rels and it didn't even come with any skills. Was he trying to scam me? Maybe he had me pegged for someone too young and inexperienced to know better. Time to nip that idea in the bud.

“I don’t think I need that.”

“Really? It’s the work of the master blacksmith, Nothton.”

“So a famous person made it, huh? Still, five million is a lot for something with no skills on it.”

“Oh, so you have a Discerning Eye for Items, sir?”

“I do,” I replied matter-of-factly.

The shopkeeper’s expression changed drastically. Suddenly, he looked overjoyed.

“Would you be interested in working for me?” he asked. “Part-time would be fine.”

“Unfortunately, my plate is pretty full right now. I’m guessing you’re looking for an appraiser?”

“Yeah. My last one ran off with most of my cash… You know, I have a number of items that I’m desperate to have appraised. If you could spare even an hour, I’d be really grateful.”

Grateful enough to cut me a deal on that shield? It was worth a try, at least.

“I’ve got some things to do,” I said. “But if you don’t mind waiting, I can help out.”

“Absolutely, please come by whenever you have time. I’ll be waiting.”

I was a fellow shopkeeper now, so I felt bad for him. I guess there really were some awful people out there who’d steal all your money. It made me realize how lucky I was to be surrounded by such kind people. Although I guess they were all a bit…odd, in their own way.

Chapter 22:
Let’s Go to the Hot Springs!

THE WIND BLEW GENTLY through the fields and rifled through my hair. I stretched and drank in the fine weather. Luna and I were visiting a small village today, not far from town. We’d taken an adventuring request and, since Emma was off on a trip, it was just the two of us.

The field in front of us was a mess. A monster, which the villagers called the Unruly Bull, had destroyed fences, ploughed up the fields, and even rammed into some of the houses. It had two massive horns and a powerful charge. We’d have to be careful. This thing had done some serious damage around here. If we were going to defeat it, we would have to use our brains.

Which is how I came to be standing in the middle of this field, holding a red cloth, trying to keep away from the deranged bull.

“Come on! Over here.”

I fluttered the cloth and the bull pawed at the ground. It was working! Luna watched on anxiously, ready to take her shot when the moment was right. My job was to tire this thing out first.

“Come and get me, you stupid cow!”

The bull exploded with rage and charged me head-on. I was a little shocked by just how powerful it was. I held the cloth as far away from my body as I could and whipped it out of the way just before the bull struck it.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

The bull stomped and gored the earth with its horns, and I fluttered the cloth again, once more enticing it to charge. One wrong step and I’d be smashed to pieces. The monster charged again, and a hundred different horrible deaths flashed through my mind. Before I could fall prey to any of them, Luna took her shot.

Ka-pow!

Her Energy Shot streaked across the field and struck the creature right in the face. Bullseye! And with enough force to strike through into its brain. It was lights out for this monster.

Luna ran over and gave me a high five.

“Nice teamwork!” she said.

“We worked so well together, I think our breathing was even in sync!”

“Yes,” she agreed. “We might even become the strongest duo in Odin, Sir Noir.”

We should probably include Emma and call it a trio.

We dragged the bull’s corpse to the villagers—since that was part of the request—and dumped it in the square. As soon as we stepped back, the villagers all crowded around it.

“Think they’re gonna eat it?” I asked.

“No,” said Luna. “I think…they’re gonna kick it.”

“Kick it?!”

She was right. But, in the end, they didn’t just kick it—they full-on whaled on it. I was shocked, but it explained why the request had asked for delivery of the body. The creature had caused them so much suffering and pain, I guess they wanted to get even.

“It’s a sad world we live in,” said Luna. “The powerless are taken advantage of and trodden on. That’s why I do what I can to ease people’s suffering. Speaking of, someone’s injured over there. Come on.”

“Okay.”

Luna wasn’t here in her role as a cleric, but she still healed the villager with her Healing Shot.

“Do me next, my stomach hurts.”

“Me, too, I cut my hand while cooking.”

“Um, just a second, please.”

Dozens of people crowded around, all begging Luna for help. I tried to stop them, but she was having none of it.

“Watch and learn, Sir Noir. This is my job. It might not be much, but it helps.”

“Luna, I think you’ve done enough today.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “All thanks to you.”

I was glad that the Increased Magic Capacity was working.

“I can keep going,” she said. “Look! A Healing Shot for you, and one for you, and one for you—ah.”

The moment she fired that last shot, Luna collapsed. She was frothing at the mouth again.

“See! I knew you were overdoing it!” I shouted, cradling her in my arms.

I took her inside for a while to rest, and after a while we headed home. Luna seemed a little down on our way back, so I tried to cheer her up.

“You looked so cool earlier, taking out that monster.”

“Don’t try to make me feel better, Sir Noir. It just makes it worse. Tell me, do…do I make a weird face when I pass out?”

Well, this was awkward. How could I tell her that her eyes rolled back in her head when she fainted, and she frothed at the mouth? Still, she deserved the truth.

“Haa, I can’t believe I’m still subjecting you to that…” She shook her head, lost in thought for a moment. “Hey, you think you could remove my Fainting Spell skill?!”

“I can try, but are you sure about that, Luna?”

When I had asked before, she’d said something boastful about the need for limitations or something.

Luna bashfully averted her gaze. “I mean, it’s just so embarrassing. I don’t want people to see me like that.”

“I guess it’d be good to know that you won’t faint in combat,” I said. “Leave it to me.”

“Oh, but I don’t want you wasting your LP! I’ll help you save up! With my body!”

That was…kinda weird. I guess she just let her excitement get the better of her. An awkward silence settled over us.

“Oh,” said Luna, realizing what she’d just said. “Um, I didn’t mean it like that. Not like…you know, but something a little milder…mind you, if you really wanted to, Sir Noir, I would…”

“I-It’s fine,” I stammered. “You can just give me the usual hugs and stuff.”

“Yeah, I’ll think of something. Like, you know, that pretty girl rice ball thing. I know, let’s make it a promise.”

Luna held out her pinky finger, and we swore on it. I was both excited and a little scared to find out what she would come up with.



And, just like that, it was time for the grand opening of Stardian Rarities. The whole family had spent the last few days preparing for this moment. I'd also asked Luna and Lola to help purchase rare items from their acquaintances, and even given Emma some money to pick up any unusual items she saw while she was away. And thus, without much effort, I had a wide assortment of merchandise to sell. The shop was all painted and finished, too, so we were all restless. As usual, my father was the worst.

"Oh nooo, Noir! Noir! Noir! What are we gonna do?! There are customers lined up outside!"

"That's because we worked hard to advertise the grand opening," I told him. "Though Tigerson is probably helping."

Tigerson sat outside the door with a sign around his neck. After all, there was no way people wouldn't notice a giant black lion with a flower growing out of his head.

"Calm down, father. We'll just have to do what we can with what we have."

"Y-you're right. We can do this. We have to. I mean, I already I quit my job. If this goes poorly…"

He trembled with fear and my mother patted him on the back. She seemed to have confidence to spare.

"All right, everyone huddle up!"

"Yes, let's!"

We gathered together and put our arms around each other.

"We can do this! This will be the best store in the neighborhood!" father cried.

Silence. Not even a single cheer. Alice shifted awkwardly.

"Only the neighborhood? Father, don't you think you're setting your sights a little too low?"

"T-too low? I was trying to be realistic…"

“Brother, if you would.”

“Me? Okay, then.” I cleared my throat. “Let’s make this the best shop in town!”

“……”

“Huh?”

That still wasn’t much of a reaction. Alice shot a glance at our mother.

“Please?”

“We’re going to sell more than any shop in the world! With a twofold lead over our nearest rival!”

“Yeaaaaah!”

Their energy was truly incredible. Father and I were left squarely in the dust.

“Uhh…”

A twofold lead over second place—wasn’t that a little ambitious? I guess we needed a little initiative if we were going to do this.

With that, we opened the shop.

“Stardian Rarities is now open for business!” I shouted.

Almost before I could finish, an avalanche of people flooded in.

<If you buy something, you can play with me even more!>

Tigerson’s sales tactic worked on the young and old alike. *Thank you, Tigerson!*

I was happy that the store filled up so quickly, even if it did make me worry that the space might be too small. There were plenty run-of-the-mill patrons about, but some looked more like mages or nobles. There may even have been some material suppliers here on business. And why wouldn’t they be?! After all, I had plenty of things that might appeal to them. We were even offering free samples of golden slime jelly.

“We only have limited quantities, but here, have a taste. It’s delicious.”

“It’s…so sweet?!”

“It sure is! Almost everyone falls in love with it after a single taste.”

“Don’t tell me this is from a golden slime,” said the customer. “Where did you find it?”

“Oh, now that’s our little secret.”

I wasn’t about to tell them about the hidden dungeon, after all.

In the end, we had to close the shop early. We’d completely sold out! We showed out the last customer and shut the doors. My whole family was grinning with glee. My father pumped his fist in the air.

“Guys, we did such a good job today! Starting tomorrow, your mother and I can handle things here.”

“I know you can handle it, father. I’ll do my best to bring in top-shelf materials.”

“I have high hopes, my dear boy.”

From tomorrow, it’d be him buying things to make up any shortfall in our stocks. He had a pretty good eye for these things, so he wouldn’t get anything too weird. Probably. Maybe I was just fooled by his enthusiasm.

“All right, Noir,” said Emma. “I think we should get ready.”

“Yeah, we really should.”

After all, tomorrow was the start of our trip to the hot springs, and there were a few things we needed to pick up in town. We headed out ahead of the others to get what we needed for the trip.

Afterwards, I went home and slept like a log. Before I knew it, it was time to go. Emma and I met up and headed to the outskirts of town to join the rest of S-Class. We were ten minutes early, but everyone else was already there. Clearly, everybody was really excited.

“I see you two are joined at the hip as always,” said Ms. Elena. “You’re the last to arrive.”

“Good morning! I guess everyone got here early.”

“Yeah, I’d say everyone’s got the right attitude, but…you boys need to shape up.”

Ms. Elena scowled at them, and I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t like the looks in their eyes. They kept ogling the girls and giggling impishly.

“Ah! I’m so excited! I love hot springs!”

A lot of them stared brazenly at Emma as she chatted with her friends. I couldn’t blame them for it, necessarily, but most of the boys in the class were staring at her. This was ridiculous. It was time for me to play the part of my best friend’s bodyguard.

Chapter 23:
Run-in with the Pixies

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, a hot spring was discovered in a mountain called Amora, which sat just south of town. Before that, no one had really gone there, as there were some clever monsters in the area. But once the royal family started visiting the springs, the place was never short of guests. They'd even built lodgings around it.

That said, it could still be dangerous, which was why Ms. Elena was giving us a lecture.

"Listen up, kids. This isn't just a vacation, this is training."

"We knoooow," moaned one of the boys.

Ms. Elena faked a smile, walked over to him, and punched him right in the gut.

"Agh…"

"When I was a mercenary, I saw plenty of simpering fools like you. But they never got any jobs, do you know why?"

"No…"

"Because they were dead. So don't get too full of yourself, and don't let your guard down just because your opponent looks weak. Remember that, all of you. Now let's get going."

She was tough as ever—I hardly recognized her as the woman with whom I had the occasional, secret butt-related rendezvous. Even those idiot boys shaped up a little after that.

The springs were about a half day's walk away, but there were a ton of us—more than twenty!—and that oddly made the hiking pretty fun. The real challenge would come when we got to the foot of the mountain.

"Listen up, kids. There are a lot of monsters up here, so I want you all to figure out how to fight together, understand?"

Ms. Elena didn’t give us much more than that to go on. I guess she wanted us to figure it out for ourselves. As if on cue, everyone gathered together and started talking strategy.

“Why don’t we all just fight with whatever we’re most skilled at?” suggested one of the boys.

Some of the other students nodded, but I wasn’t so sure. There were so many of us, it’d probably be chaos if we just went for it. And with all that magic flying around, there was bound to be some friendly fire. Before I could figure out how to word it, Emma spoke up.

“I think there’s a better approach. We need to form groups of people skilled at melee combat and position them around the magic users, who can provide support.”

She really knew how to talk to people.

“That makes sense,” said the boy. “There are a lot of trees and uneven surfaces, so we’ll probably be dealing with surprise attacks. I’m impressed Emma, you’re more than a pretty face!”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

Emma flashed me a victory sign as she shrugged off the compliment. I smiled at her. Emma had read a lot of books on strategy and monsters, and now all her hard work was paying off. We organized two or three melee fighters up front and behind our group, but we still needed to watch our flanks.

“Where are you going, Emma?” I asked.

“I’m wherever you are, Noir!”

“So up front I guess?”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go.”

Emma and I had more experience than everyone else in our class, so it made sense to put us in the direct path of any potential enemies.

“The footing’s pretty bad, so watch out.”

“Got it. By the way, what kind of monsters do you get here? I heard there were pixies or something?”

“Yeah, and there are spear lizards too.”

Apparently, the lizards worked in swarms, so we would have to be careful. Our lodgings for the night were right at the summit of Amora, and we'd almost certainly run into something on the climb. Still, after over an hour of hiking, we hadn't encountered anything.

"I'm surprised it's been so quiet," I said.

"Yeah."

"Look out! Don't step there, Noir! Get back!"

"Huh? Ah!"

I jumped back instinctively and braced myself for whatever was coming, but nothing did. I turned to the student who had shouted the warning—a long-haired boy called Hjorth.

"Did you sense something?" I asked.

"He he he, Noir, I just saved your life."

He picked up a stone and threw it. The second it hit the spot in front of me, the earth cracked, revealing a massive hole.

No way…it was a trap?

"Thank you, Hjorth."

"Why are you thanking me?" he said. "Isn't it right to save a comrade?"

Hjorth gave me a thumbs up and glanced back at the girls. A few of them looked a little put off by his posturing, but I was genuinely grateful. That pit was full of pointy spears. It'd be hard to take a fall like that and not get hurt.

"Thank you for saving Noir," said Emma.

"E-Emma…i-it's no big deal."

Your tough guy attitude slipped a little there, Hjorth.

Worse, something was eating at me about this whole situation.

"Who would do something like this?"

"Maybe someone who doesn't want us reaching the springs?"

“What, like another guest? Why would they bother? I think the pixies are our prime suspect.”

“But pixies are tiny!” said Emma. “They couldn’t dig a hole like that.”

She was right. Pixies were corrupted faeries. I’d never seen one, but all the stories said they could fit in the palm of your hand. While we pondered the situation, a girl’s voice came from above us.

“You know who knows the answer? I do!”

The person speaking had transparent wings and was absolutely bitty—no more than ten inches tall. She had light brown skin and silky hair. If she were human, she’d probably have looked about our age. She flew past our faces and everyone just stared at her, at a complete loss for words.

“Bad people dug that hole. Thieves.”

“And you are?”

“I’m a monster called a pixie, but don’t get the wrong idea! I promised the gods I’d be good.”

Was she trying to win us over? Admittedly, from her stature to her gestures, she *was* very cute. The other students seemed to agree.

“She’s adorable…”

“Yeah, but pixies trick humans, don’t they?”

“You’re really frustrating, you know,” said the pixie. “There are good pixies and bad pixies of course. Just like humans.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, and everyone apologized. These pixies were probably as smart as humans, if not smarter. It was probably a good idea to figure out what she could do.

Name: Pixie

Level: 5

Skills: Monster Puppetry

She wasn’t that strong, but that Monster Puppetry skill really got my attention. What was it for? A puppetry spell sounded pretty useful, but I had to wonder if a Level 5 pixie could manipulate anything stronger than herself. I tried to ask Ms. Elena, but she just looked away. I guess it was all part of the learning experience.

“Emma, guys, what do you think?” I asked.

“I think…we can trust her, just a little.”

“I think so, too. She doesn’t seem like she means any harm.”

“I believe her as well. I *have* heard that there are a lot of thieves in this area.”

Cuteness really did trump everything, didn’t it? I was about to tell everyone else about her Monster Puppetry skill, but before I could, the pixie made her move.

“I love you all! I love humans! You’re going to the hot springs, aren’t you? I’ll take you there,” she said, flying ahead of us.

We held our formation and followed.

“Hey, Noir, I’m glad she seems to be a good monster.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

It was true that not all monsters were evil. There were plenty that obeyed humans, or were even friendly toward them. I mean, just look at Tigerson. But this was a pixie—you know, cute, sweet, and *corrupted*—and I couldn’t let my guard down. If she tried to lead us off the main road, or if we encountered another monster and she claimed it was friendly, I would know she was up to no good.

“Hey, what should I call you?” she asked.

“My name’s Noir.”

“And you’re the leader of the group?”

“Of course not. Surely I look too weak to be the leader?”

“He he he he, maybe. By the way, Noir, wanna take a little detour? The thing is, I know a very secret spot, with a very, *very* secret hot spring.”

“A hot spring?!” said Hjorth.

I guess he was a big fan. Everyone else seemed to be murmuring in agreement.

“Doesn’t that sound dangerous?” I asked. “I mean, we’re going to a hot spring anyway, shouldn’t we just keep going?”

“Oh, what’s the big deal?” asked Hjorth. “I’ll know if there’s a trap, and I’ll tell you right away.”

“Yeah, but you can’t sense everything.”

“Then let’s take a vote,” said Hjorth.

When it came down to it, there were far more raised hands for taking the detour. Even Emma seemed like she was going to vote for it, but she held back on my behalf.

Sorry for ruining your fun.

“Then it’s settled,” said the pixie. “Follow me!”

“Let’s go, everybody!” Hjorth agreed.

He and the pixie took the lead, and I muttered to myself in frustration. I really hoped that I was wrong, and that all that was waiting for us at the end of this detour was, in actual fact, a secret hot spring. But I was starting to have some serious misgivings.

Chapter 24:
An Unbelievable Victory

THE PIXIE LED US quite a ways off the main road, trekking through pure, unadulterated wilderness. She could fly, so it was easy enough for her, but we weren't quite as lucky. The way forward was steep and narrow, forcing us to break formation.

"If something attacks us now," I said, "we're in deep trouble."

I kept a careful eye on our surroundings while Hjorth chatted away happily with the pixie. He'd really taken a liking to her.

"There!" she cried out. "There! Just go through."

She was pointing at the mouth of a cave, sunk into the rock face and painfully ominous.

"Just follow the cave and you'll find the secret spring," said the pixie.

The cave was narrow and dark, and we could only enter two-by-two. If anything attacked us in there, we were done for. But before I could say anything, Ms. Elena raised her blade-sharp voice above the chatter.

"It's getting late. Even if you reach this secret spring, what then? Do you want to climb to the summit in the dark?"

I knew she didn't trust that pixie, either. She had to be really concerned if she was giving us advice like this, but few of the students listened to her.

"It'll be fine," said Hjorth. "We won't stay long. It's not that far is it, pixie?"

"It's about a five-minute walk."

"See, Ms. Elena?" he said. "It's fine. And, if there are any traps, I'll know."

Hjorth seemed a little too confident. I had a quick glance over his skills, and discovered Grade C Trap Perception. It was far from infallible. Going by the skill's description, there were quite a lot of traps he couldn't

sense. Not to mention the fact that it was pitch-black in there. Without Night Vision, it was already dangerous enough. I stepped forward.

“I’ll scout it out,” I said. “If there really is a secret spring, I’ll come back for you all.”

“I’ll go with you,” Emma said.

“No. I appreciate the sentiment, Emma, but it’s too tight in there.”

Once everyone agreed, I left them at the entrance and followed the pixie into the cave. In these conditions, Night Vision wasn’t perfect. It made it a little easier to see, but I couldn’t let my concentration slip even for a moment.

“You know,” said the pixie. “You’re really brave to come in here by yourself, Noir.”

“To be honest, I’m a coward. I just don’t have a choice.”

“Why not?”

“You tell me,” I said, drawing a weapon.

It was too narrow in here to use a sword—high ceiling, no swinging room—so I pulled out my Piercing Spear instead. The pixie noticed immediately.

“Why did you do that?” she asked. “There aren’t any monsters here. You can rest easy.”

“I told you, I’m a coward.”

“But that spear is so scary. I wish you’d put it away.”

“Sorry, no can do. What could you do if something happened to me?”

“Ugh,” the pixie scoffed. “I don’t like you anymore, Noir.”

“Ha ha ha, oh no, you don’t like me, how horrible!”

There was no way I was letting go of that spear, and it wasn’t long before it proved to be the right decision. Just ahead, there were strange holes in both walls—just big enough for someone to fit through. I couldn’t see what was inside them, but I was sure something was lurking in there.

“I know, I’ll tell you a funny story, Noir,” the pixie said, talking quickly…as though she were trying to distract me. “So the thing about

pixies is, we actually have three ears…are you listening to me? Why did you stop?”

“I almost missed something.”

“Missed what?” she asked.

“That there are holes in the walls here. You have a better view of them. Is there anyone back there?” I asked.

The pixie peered into the darkness.

“Nope,” she said cheerfully. “Nothing there.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“If there’s a monster back there,” she said. “Then why hasn’t it attacked me?”

“I didn’t say anything about monsters. Why blame it on monsters and not the thieves you were talking about earlier?”

“What?” said the pixie. “What are you talking about? And stop looking at me like that, it’s scary. It just looks like the kind of place that there’d be monsters, that’s all.”

“No,” I said. “You’re not that stupid. You mentioned monsters because you know there are some back there.”

The pixie’s expression darkened, but she wasn’t giving up yet.

“Look, I just made an assumption,” she said. “That’s all. You’re so paranoid. Boys like that really aren’t very popular with the ladies, you know?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll spell it out: I know there are things back there that you’re controlling with your Monster Puppetry skill.”

“Spear lizards, get him!”

Voila. Suddenly, lizardmen poured out of the holes in the walls. All of them were carrying spears. They were coming from both sides, so I fired off a twenty-inch Stone Bullet at the closest one and took it out with a thunk—I could’ve gone bigger, but I wanted more speed and force.

That bought me enough time to gauge the way the others were moving, and I focused my energy on landing a counterattack. Thanks to the

spear’s Piercing skill, the second I lunged, the spearhead skewered through the next creature’s skull and came out the other side. But it wasn’t enough—there were more of them.

Was the pixie controlling *all* these guys? If so, that was an incredibly strong skill. I considered trying to find my way back out, but the lizardmen weren’t particularly strong. I felled another two in much the same way, but they kept coming.

Bwooom!

A blast of air came from behind me.

Oh no! They have me surrounded!

But they didn’t. It was a familiar spell—Wind Strike. It blew right past me and landed a headshot on one of the lizardmen.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Emma!” I said. “I thought I told you not to come.”

“I just couldn’t stand by and wait. Something could have happened to you.”

“Well, I guess you were right about that.”

“Eh he he, let’s take these two out first!”

We used our respective ranged spells to take down the last two. When things finally calmed down, there were eight bodies scattered in the cave around us.

“If they’d caught me off-guard, that could have been bad.”

“Where did that pixie run off to?” Emma asked, looking around.

“I think she went deeper into the cave.”

“Wanna go after her?”

“Yeah. It’d be safer to go back and check in with everyone else, but… If we’re quick, we might still be able to catch her.”

“Got it,” said Emma. “Let’s go.”

We headed deeper into the cave, keeping an eye out for any traps, until we found the way out.

“Where did she go…” I said, scanning the trees. “Oh! over there, on that branch!”

“I’ve got her!”

Emma fired off a Wind Strike. The tree never stood a chance. The branch snapped clean in two, and the pixie fluttered back up into the air.

“Stupid humans!” she spat. “You’re so ugly and awkward, did you really think you could hit me?”

She stuck out her tongue and flew off. I wasn’t about to let myself get bested by a tiny pixie, but she was out of range of my Bestow skill, and I couldn’t exactly fly after her. I’d have to catch up on foot.

“Emma, cast Run Like The Wind on me.”

“You got it!”

Emma snapped her fingers and I immediately felt lighter. I charged through the trees after the pixie.

“Tsk, how are you so fast?”

“I’m not letting you get away that easily.”

“Fine then,” she said. “I’ll just fly higher.”

“Like hell you will.”

As she started to climb, I Bestowed an additional twenty pounds of weight on her. Her delicate wings couldn’t take it. She fell out of the sky straight into my hand.

“You’re not getting out of this,” I told her.

“Forgive me, pretty please!”

“That’s not going to work on me.”

“You cretin!” she shouted. “Monster!”

No amount of verbal abuse from a morally deficient faerie was going to wound me. She’d known what she was doing tricking us off the path like that. There were definitely other victims.

“How many people have you fooled like this?” I asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with tricking stupid humans. They deserve it. I trusted one of you once, and he tried to sell me! *Sell* me!”

“That’s pretty horrible,” I said. “But taking it out on innocent people is unconscionable.”

“Hmph, I’m not about to listen to some stupid human like you.”

“N-N-Noir!” Emma shouted behind me. “C-come here!”

I made sure I had a good grip on the pixie and headed over. Right away, I could see what the issue was: the decomposing corpse of a woman was lying in the stream. Judging from her clothes, she must’ve been a hiker.

“Did you do this?” I asked.

“What?” said the pixie. “No, I don’t know anything about it. There are corpses all over the place around here.”

I’d been so focused on chasing her that I hadn’t even noticed, but she was right. Looking around, I could see a few different bodies, sprawled out among the trees. I tightened my grip on the pixie.

“Ngh?! Ah…h-hey…”

“I could crush you, you know that?”

“I-I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I was wrong.”

I looked around at the bodies. “There are some things you can’t apologize for.”

“Noir,” said Emma. “Why don’t we rejoin the others?”

“You’re right,” I sighed. “We should.”

I squeezed the pixie hard enough to hurt, but not so hard I’d crush her, and we found our way back to the rest of our class. When we explained what had happened, everyone was shocked. Everyone, that is, apart from Ms. Elena.

“I thought as much,” she said. “There *are* harmless pixies out there, but they aren’t common.”

“What should we do with her?” I asked.

“I can deal with her if you want.”

“Please…”

I didn’t mind taking out monsters, but this one looked too human. I handed her over to Ms. Elena.

“Damnit!” the pixie shouted. “When I’m reborn, I’ll get my revenge on you, Noir!”

“Do your worst,” I said. “I’ll protect the people I care about, no matter what you try to pull.”

“Well said,” said Ms. Elena. “We best be going now, my pixie friend.”

She headed off somewhere out of sight and returned about ten minutes later.

“Did you all learn your lesson?” she asked. “There are monsters out there who are skilled in the art of conversation and appear harmless on purpose to lure you into a trap.”

Everyone nodded quietly. This had been a valuable lesson for all of us.

It was starting to get dark, so we hurried back to the road and pushed on—arriving at our lodgings just before sunset. It was an impressive complex of buildings, fronted by a massive gate. The guards stationed there greeted us warmly.

“Are you guests?” they asked.

“Yes,” said Ms. Elena. “We’re spending the night.”

“Please,” said the guard. “Come in.”

They let us in through the gate, where we were greeted by the inn’s middle-aged proprietress.

It was a pretty big place, but the rules were simple: men and women slept in different rooms, and we were allocated different times to use the hot springs. Room and board were included, so once we’d dropped off our things, we started on a dinner of foraged vegetables and bear meat.

It was delicious, and I was glad they served the bear’s paws poached and fully intact—it was unusual (even grotesque), and would doubtless net

me a few more LP. Even the foraged vegetables were delectable. This place really was the best.

After the meal, our hostess stood up at the head of the room.

“Shall I take you to the hot springs now?” she asked. “Currently they are open to women.”

“Yay!” Emma cheered. “Hot springs! Finally!”

The girls all smiled and chattered with excitement.

“I guess we’ll head back to our room, then.”

Curiously, the boys seemed completely disinterested. Had our run-in with that pixie put them off their plan to spy on the girls?

“Are you idiots ready for this?!”

“Yeaaah!”

How foolish of me to think they’d reconsider. The second the boys entered our room, they transformed into beasts—humping the air, taking off their clothes, smacking their crotches, the whole nine yards. It was revolting.

“Ahem. Listen up, everyone,” said one of them. “I’m Allen, the eldest son of the Milanos family. I am your leader for this year’s Men’s Health Project.”

“And as you know,” said Hjorth. “I am his second-in-command.”

These deranged perverts had even come prepared. They had masks and black clothes for everyone.

“Why did we come all this way?” Allen asked. “To see naked women, of course!”

“Yeaaaah!”

They were so fired up that they were losing their minds. Allen stretched out his hand dramatically.

“But I must ask you to wait! We are still proud students of S-Class, and we cannot allow our names to be dishonored with vile appellations like ‘pervert’ and ‘peeping tom’! That is why we must don masks and disguises!”

“Hang on,” I said. “This might a bad idea. What if they have guards?”

Please rethink this stupid plan, I thought, hoping they’d listen.

“Oh no, no,” said Allen. “We should not fear such things. We are capable of overcoming any resistance.”

“And we don’t have to worry about traps or anything,” said Hjorth. “Not with my skill.”

There probably weren’t much in the way of traps in an inn, anyway. Why would there be?!

“So I ask once again for your help,” said Allen. “Brothers of the Men’s Health Project, don your masks!”

The room filled with the rustling of changing clothes. Every single one of the boys seemed to be on board with this. I’d hoped for at least one ally…

“What’s wrong, Noir? Go ahead and get changed.”

“I—”

This was getting dangerous. I glanced at the door, then sprinted for it as fast as I could.

“I can’t betray Emma’s trust!”

“He’s a traitor!” someone shouted. “Catch him!”

They all flew at me at once. Before they could catch me, I ducked and let my momentum carry me into a slide. Dozens of hands reached out to grab me. It was terrifying. Worse than any monster.

“You guys have lost your minds!”

“Of course we have!” one of them shouted. “The girls’ most closely guarded secrets are nearly within our grasp, and you dare to interfere?!”

“I’m sorry, but I have to.”

I kicked the boy away and slipped out of the room. I sprinted down the hall, but glancing back, I saw that no one was giving chase. I guess they didn’t want to draw any unwelcome attention.

“Well,” I said to myself. “That didn’t exactly go well.”

Desire had driven them all mad. Still…although they were perverts, they were nevertheless members of S-Class. Perhaps I could take one or two of them, but all ten was impossible. I had to find some other way to protect Emma's dignity.

The hot springs were actually quite a ways away. I walked out the back of the inn and carried on three or four hundred yards up the hill. There was a path here, cut into the side of the mountain. That made the going easier, but there were plenty of places to hide between the trees and boulders, and the path itself was wide enough for all ten of those hormonal hooligans.

"I don't stand a chance," I muttered. "Do I?"

Still, I trudged along until I found a woman standing in the middle of the path, wearing a stern expression.

"I never expected you to be the first to try, Noir."

"Ms. Elena?" I said. "I thought you went to the springs?"

"I'm standing guard. I thought something like this might happen. You keep away from those girls!"

She stared at me with bloodthirsty eyes. I straightened up.

"N-no! You've got it all wrong! I'm on your side! I escaped to keep the girls safe!"

"You *escaped?*"

"I guess you could call me a traitor," I admitted. "I got out before the other guys could catch me."

"So that's what's going on," she said. "You don't want them to see Emma naked."

"Of course I don't! But I don't stand a chance on my own."

I looked at Ms. Elena pleadingly. After all, we shared a bond of trust, didn't we? I gave her shoulder rubs, and she repaid me by sitting on me.

"How many are we up against?" she asked.

"All of them."

“*All* of them?! Am I teaching a gang of unscrupulous pervs? It’s time they learned their lesson.”

“Ms. Elena, can I assist? If we join forces, maybe we can do it.”

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” she said. “Let’s crush those creeping bugs.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

With Ms. Elena on my side, I had the strength to defeat a hundred drooling boys. And I would do everything in my power to defeat their perverted ambitions.

Chapter 25:
The Battle of the Hot Springs

"CAN YOU HELP ME out here?" I asked. "I mean, I could really use a hug. And one of your patented butt massages."

Ms. Elena narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"No!" I said. "Don't get the wrong idea! What I mean is, I need to prepare for this fight. Doing stuff like that gives me power. I know…it's kinda perverse."

"Fine," she said. "I'll do whatever you need, but I have a line I'm not crossing."

I hugged her, picking her up in a bridal carry. Then she gave me her special butt-massage special. It was more than enough to get me ready for battle.

"You're pretty skilled at throwing, aren't you?" Ms. Elena asked.

"I can manage."

"Well, given the circumstances, we can't exactly use knives, so I collected some rocks."

Ms. Elena set a bag of hand-sized stones down at her feet. She really was always prepared! It made me think about upgrading my C-Grade Throwing skill. It didn't require much LP, so I used my Editor skill to bump it up to B-Grade.

"Even if they are rotten to the core," Ms. Elena said, "they're still my students. We should avoid using weapons if we can. We can use this instead."

"Rope?"

"Indeed. We'll set it up between the trees. With any luck, they'll think it's some kind of trap. It'll distract them."

I was impressed.

“Brilliant as ever, Ms. Elena.” Once the boys scattered, we could pick them off easily. “Although, I guess they have Hjorth. He can tell them it isn’t a trap.”

“That’ll still take some time.”

“Good point,” I admitted. “Heh, here they come. Look at those ridiculous outfits.”

A group wearing black clothes and strange masks approached slowly, and I was caught off-guard for a moment. I’d expected a more ferocious attack.

“Woman and boy,” said one of them. “Move out of the way.”

It was Allen. He’d tried to change his voice, but it was definitely him. Even if I couldn’t see through his disguise, I still had Discerning Eye.

“I don’t think so,” I shot back. “Ms. Elena and I have teamed up.”

“I have no desire for senseless bloodshed,” said Allen. “Please, do not take up arms against our organization—the Dark Sword.”

“I thought you were calling it the ‘Men’s Health Project’?” I asked.

“I’ve never heard of that.”

Why was he playing dumb?

“It’s already dark,” I said. “So you won’t be able to see anything clearly.”

“Our passion will burn through any obstacle in our way!” Allen cried. “Let’s go, brothers!”

“Yeaaaah!”

They lunged toward us, and I crouched down to scoop up some of the stones.

“Seems like these idiots need a lesson,” said Ms. Elena. “Noir, I’ll take responsibility for whatever happens. Don’t hold back.”

“You got it.”

Pew! My first rock flew toward my target and hit him right in the knee, dropping him to the ground.

“Oww?!”

I guess that B-Grade Throwing was really having an effect.

According to Discerning Eye, the boy I’d hit didn’t have any ranged abilities, so I left him where he was. Meanwhile, Ms. Elena was performing exactly as I’d expected: she’d already felled two boys with her rocks and panicked several others.

“Watch out!” one of them shouted. “Those two are crazy! And they’re not pulling any punches!”

“Calm down,” Hjorth snapped. “Split up and flank them from either side. Those ropes are a bluff. There are no traps here.”

They all had faith in Hjorth’s skill, and several boys launched themselves into the trees, leaping over the ropes. They were trying to slip past us.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You lot ought to use your perverse energies for something more productive!” Ms. Elena added.

We kept pitching our stones. Mostly, we hit our marks, stopping the boys in their tracks. But Hjorth slipped nimbly through the trees, shielding himself behind their trunks to avoid our barrage of stones. Before we knew it, he was behind us. There was nothing left between him and the paradise that waited in the baths. All he had to do was keep running.

“Ugh, damn it,” growled Ms. Elena. “We should—”

Before she could finish, her eyes went wide and she dodged out of the way. A moment later, the point of a rapier plunged between us.

“Oh, Noir,” said Allen. “Ms. Elena, how could you forget about me?”

He’d been watching us closely, waiting for an opportunity. Now he was planning to hold us up long enough for Hjorth to reach the baths. This wasn’t good…

“Ms. Elena,” I shouted. “Go after Hjorth. I’ll handle Allen.”

“He’s very good with that sword,” she warned. “So be careful.”

The second she turned her back, Allen lunged to attack. I drew my sword to parry.

“You’re helping her get away?” he said. “Well, that works for me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“It means I’m going to crush you!”

He attacked again. I managed to block, but now he had me on the defensive. I took a step back to put some distance between us.

“You can’t beat me in a sword fight,” said Allen. “What are you going to do now, fourth son of the Stardia family?”

“Third son, actually.”

Allen shrugged. “Same difference. Everyone after the second son is expendable!”

Well, that was cruel. I mean, true, but still cruel.

Still, he’d have to try harder than that to get a rise out of me. I readied a large rock in my left hand. This time, I had a plan.

“Hey,” said Allen. “Do you really think you can hit me? I should have expected you’d try something like that. It’s a cheap tactic from a worthless third son. You think that I, Allen, the first son and heir of the Milanos family, would fall for something like that?”

Dude, why are you even bothering with that mask if you’re just going to shout your name for everyone to hear?

Still, the odds were against me. I probably couldn’t distract him enough to get a shot in, but that didn’t stop me. I threw the rock slowly. Very slowly. After all, the long air time gave me more than enough opportunity to Bestow the skill Sticky.

“Ah ha ha ha!” Allen laughed. “I can bat that rock away without taking my eyes off you, you fool…what?”

He blocked the rock with his blade, only to find that it stuck to the metal. It wasn’t all *that* sticky, it was a rock after all, but it was enough for my plan.

“You’re wide open!”

Thwack!

“Hngh!” Allen cried, doubling over. “That…was…not fair…”

“Well, we never established a rule against hitting below the belt, so…”

I’d known how much it would hurt, and I never wanted to go there, but he hadn’t given me much choice. The method might be inelegant, but it did the job. Allen was down. Which meant there was only Hjorth to go, and there was no way Ms. Elena would—

“Wha?!”

Someone stumbled into me, and I caught them before they fell. When I looked down and saw who it was, I was shocked.

“Ms. Elena?”

What had Hjorth done to get the upper hand?

“There’s something wrong,” Ms. Elena complained, finding her feet again. “He’s too powerful.”



I followed her gaze up the path. Hjorth stood in the distance, flexing his muscles. I guess he was trying to show off.

“What did you do?” I called out.

“Aw, shucks, you caught me. I drank a potion and put on an accessory to give me superstrength.”

Apparently, that had pushed him beyond his normal limits. Either way, his sheer power was a bit terrifying.

“Don’t tell me you took a potion just for this one act of brazen stupidity?” said Ms. Elena.

“I did,” Hjorth replied. “I sold everything I own for it.”

Ms. Elena sighed. “Hjorth, you’re a true idiot.”

“An idiot? Maybe it looks that way to a woman.”

“I’m sure a man would also find your motives asinine. Isn’t that right, Noir?”

I was at a loss for words. I mean, I could understand where Hjorth was coming from. I was desperate to protect Emma, of course I was. But if she hadn’t been at the springs, could I truly say that I wouldn’t have joined in?

Hjorth seemed to pick up on that. “It’s every man’s dream, isn’t it Noir?”

“I… suppose,” I admitted.

Ms. Elena looked incredulous. “Noir? Are you kidding me? Why would you go to such lengths just to see your classmates naked?”

Before I could respond, Hjorth flew into a rage.

“*Just* to see our classmates naked?!” he howled. “You really don’t get it, do you?! It’s important *because* they’re our classmates! True eroticism comes from somewhere close to home. Strippers don’t even compare! To us, those girls are the most exciting thing in the whole world! We would lay down our lives to see them naked, you absolute cretin!”

The air around him practically crackled with energy. Even Ms. Elena sensed it, taking a step back.

“I understand how you fee—” she broke off. “No. No, actually, I don’t. Either way, I won’t let you peep on those girls.”

“Are you really going to let this happen, Noir?” Hjorth demanded. “You want to look, too, don’t you? Then come on! I’ll give you five seconds to join me. Five, four, three, two, one…you treacherous bastard!”

He was slobbering as he yelled at us. Whatever was going on with him, he’d completely lost it. He lunged forward, fists flying. Frustratingly, I couldn’t get out of the way fast enough. One of his punches grazed my cheek. Any closer, and I would have been out cold. Even when Ms. Elena landed a heavy kick in his stomach, he only staggered a little.

“I guess it’s strengthened his muscles,” she said.

“It sure has, Ms. Elena.”

The two of them locked together in a grapple, and the fight became a pure contest of strength. Now that she wasn’t pulling her punches, Ms. Elena was holding her own. She was tough. Really tough. Even bare-handed.

But thanks to her efforts, Hjorth left his back wide open. I considered cutting him down, but I really didn’t want to go around stabbing my classmates. Instead, I punched him right in the spine.

“You really think you can protect your precious Emma with such half-hearted efforts?” he demanded.

Hjorth pushed Ms. Elena away and grabbed me by the collar, lifting me off the ground. His hands dug right into my neck. I couldn’t breathe!

“The winner is always the one with the strongest will,” he said. “Aren’t they?!”

“Ughh…”

I tried kicking him in the stomach, but it was hopeless. I was supposed to be so much stronger than him, so what was happening here? There had to be more to his strength than some lousy potion. Maybe his desire to peep was just more powerful than my desire to stop him. That would be frankly embarrassing.

Desperate, and a little ashamed, I created the skill Powerless and Bestowed it on him. It cost a ton of LP, but this was no time to be frugal.

“Huh?”

I watched as Hjorth’s body shrunk. Then I grabbed his arms and pried them off me.

“Well,” I said. “This is what I think about it!”

I tossed him onto his back and he flailed like a fish. He couldn’t even stand up again.

“Haa, I’m exhausted.”

I plopped down on the ground, assured of my victory. It was over.

“Eh he he he…”

“Why are you laughing?” I asked.

“Because we won,” said Hjorth.

He still couldn’t move, but he was grinning. It had me worried.

“Now’s your chance, Kentoll! Time for our otherwise unremarkable speed star!”

“What?”

One of the boys, who’d been lying face down on the ground with the others, stood up. Kentoll laughed and started running.

“Ah ha ha ha!” he cackled. “I just pretended to get hit! I’ll carry all your hopes and dreams on my back, guys! I’ll make sure to tell you all the dirty details!”

“What the—?” I shouted. “Get back here!”

I mustered up the strength to give chase, but he had a head start. And he must have had some kind of speed skill, because he was *fast*. There was no way I could catch him.

“I can see steam!” he cried. “Wait for me, girls! I’m going to pray before Emma’s massive honkers!”

“Like hell you will!”

I had to do something. I could always Bestow him with Heavy, but I hesitated. He was so fast, the cost of it was obscene. It would take me down

to just 200 LP—enough to leave me feeling sick and to put me in some serious danger.

If I ran out of LP, I would die.

Still, I had to stop him. No matter what.

“Eat this.”

I successfully Bestowed the skill, and Kentoll slowed down to a crawl. It didn’t take me long to catch up, but by then he was only a few steps away from the bath. I had to make it! I had to!

“Emmaaaa!” shouted Kentoll. “Here I come!”

“Oh no you don’t!”

Splash!

We flew into the spring together.

“Gargh!”

I popped my head out of the water and got Kentoll in a headlock before he could look around.

“Emma!” I shouted. “Everyone! Get out of the baths! He’s a peeping tom! I’ll keep my eyes closed while I restrain him!”

Please hurry, girls. I feel weak already. I can’t hold on for much longer!

But no one answered. There weren’t even any screams. I opened my eyes a crack and was shocked to find the spring was empty! How was that possible? Before I could panic, I heard Emma’s voice from somewhere out of the water.

“Noir? What are you doing here?”

“Emma…I thought you were in the spring?”

“Ms. Elena told us to wait outside until she joined us.”

Oh, that was clever. Ms. Elena had predicted everything. I was relieved to see that all the girls still had their clothes on.

“Well,” I said. “That’s good. I don’t think I can keep this up any longer…”

“Are you okay?!”

“I’m almost out of LP,” I admitted.

“That’s awful! Hang on!”

With no regard for her clothes, Emma waded in and carried me out. Once we were out of the water, she did all sorts of things to help me recover my LP. It was nothing unusual, but we’d never done these things in front of other people before. It was embarrassing and, even worse, it didn’t help at all.

“What? You didn’t get any LP?” she asked.

“Nope. I guess it’s because we already hugged and kissed this morning.”

It would be tomorrow before I could recover any more LP from Emma with our usual routine. That novelty requirement sure picked a hell of a time to kick in.

“I’ll be fine,” I lied. “I feel a little better already.”

My head was pounding and my body felt like lead. I was probably going to throw up.

“Don’t you lie to me,” Emma said. “I can tell you’re suffering… Girls, help me tend to Noir!”

The other girls rushed over. Did they know I’d been fighting to protect them from a gang of peeping toms? They must have, because they embraced me one after the other. In the space of a few moments, I recovered enough LP to start feeling much better. That was when Ms. Elena came running over.

“Looks like you kept your word,” she said. “I’m glad you didn’t fall under their bad influence.”

“Great idea having the girls wait to go in,” I said.

“You did well, too, Noir,” said Ms. Elena. “Thanks to you, their ambitions were dashed.”

Kentoll was still playing dead in the water. Ms. Elena grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him out.

“I’m going to go back to the inn and give these sex-crazed jag-offs a lecture. Enjoy the spring, girls.”

I turned to follow her back, but for some reason she handed me a towel. Two towels, in fact.

“You must be tired,” she said. “I’ll talk to the owner. Go and join them.”

“Wh-what?”

“You fought hard for the sake of their dignity,” said Ms. Elena. “You deserve a reward. But you have to keep your hips and eyes covered with those towels.”

So that’s what they were for. I turned to look at the girls.

“Are… are you guys okay with this? If I’m blindfolded, I mean?”

“Yeah, totally!”

Really?!

I guess the idea of sharing the spring with a harmless guy in a blindfold was probably kind of fun for them.

“Hey,” I said. “Emma, are you sure about this?”

“If you’re blindfolded, it’ll be fine. We owe you our thanks, after all. Now hurry up and get ready.”

“Oh, Noir,” said one of the other girls. “You better keep that blindfold on!”

“Got it…”

I was still confused about what was happening exactly, but I did as I was told.

And that’s the story of how my LP shot up to over 10,000.

Chapter 26:
Home Again

WITH OUR CLASS'S depraved visit to the hot springs over, I returned home to the Stardia estate.

"I'm back!"

No one answered. Maybe they were out at the shop? I wanted to join them, but first it was time to take a little break. I headed up to my room to do just that, but jolted suddenly away when I found Alice lying in my bed. She was hugging my pillow, and even kissing it!

"Er…Alice?"

"Uh, b-brother?!" She jumped up and started talking like everything was normal. "Welcome home! I'm so glad that you've returned safely."

"Uh, yeah, so what were you doing in my bed exactly?"

"Umm, well, I couldn't sleep last night. I was worried about you… and before I knew it, I was here—bathing in your scent."

I backed up a step. "Well, that sure took an odd turn at the end."

"But you smell really good!" Alice protested.

She hid her head in her hands, and I just stood there, wondering what to do. She was a cute kid, so I guess I could forget I saw anything. I deftly changed the subject, and it turned out that Alice didn't have any plans either. We locked up the house and headed to the shop together.

"That reminds me," she said. "Leila came around looking for you yesterday."

"Did she say what she wanted?"

"Something about hand-to-hand combat training? I guess your schedules just didn't match up."

Leila must have had some free time. I felt bad for missing her.

"She said she'd come again in a few days," Alice said.

“Got it. I’ll be there next time.”

“Oh, look! Tigerson’s hard at work again.”

Said tiger—ah, lion—was outside our shop to attract customers, and he had gathered quite a crowd. It seemed he was especially popular with children.

“Sit! Come on, sit!”

<*Goodness gracious, I am not a dog.*>

“Then I’m not buying anything.”

<*Hm. Very well.*>

Tigerson faithfully sat down. He even wagged his tail to complete the show.

“Now I want you to bark three times!”

<*Are you trying to debase me?*>

“I guess I won’t buy anything after all…”

<*Three times, you say? Woof!*>

Tigerson was so devoted. I could cry! He was probably doing more than anyone to drive our shop’s sales. I had to help him out.

“All right everyone,” I shouted. “Please don’t force him to do things like that. He’s a proud lion, you know.”

“Aw, but he has a flower growing out of his head!”

“It’s a very important flower. If you don’t treat him nicely, you can’t come in anymore.”

<*Wait,*> Tigerson whispered in my ear. <*His parents are big spenders. I would not want to displease them…*>

“Really?”

“Fine,” said the boy. “We’re not shopping here anymore.”

He pouted and turned away. I had to do something to preserve the shop’s reputation.

“I-I’m sorry. Um, what did you want again?”

“I want to see a lion knight,” he said. “Do that and I’ll buy stuff.”

“A lion knight?”

“Is that sword just for decoration?” he asked. “Why don’t you swing it. I bet you’re really weak.”

The little brat! Was that any way to treat a guy holding a sword? I swung it a few times to get his attention—just gently, and always a few inches away from his face. Still, he looked really scared all of a sudden. Had I gone too far?

“Is that good enough?” I asked. “I can do it again if you didn’t get a good look.”

“Eeek! I-I’ve seen enough,” the boy stammered. “I-I understand…”

<*Wait, you requested a lion knight, but I have done nothing.*>

“Good point,” said the boy. “Why don’t you roar to complete the atmosphere?”

<*Roaaaaaar!*>

“Eeeeeek!”

Okay, this time we *definitely* went too far. The kid lost his footing and froze solid. I suppose Tigerson was, in truth, a very powerful monster. I offered the boy a hand before he wet himself.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “We didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I-I’m so sorry!” the boy stuttered. “I’m sorry for calling you weak! Pl-please don’t kill me…”

“We aren’t going to kill you! As… as long as you buy lots of things from the shop.”

A shopkeeper’s gotta do what a shopkeeper’s gotta do, right? The kid vigorously nodded.

“I-I will! I’ll make my father buy lots!”

“Thank you very much.”

Okay, so we didn’t come out of that looking great, but it worked out all right.

At this point, it was fair to say that the shop was a success. We had no shortage of customers and had developed a good reputation. I wasn't surprised to learn that the golden slime jelly was the talk of the town. It was working. It was really working! Even the odd dolls my mother made were flying off the shelves. She called them Awful Dolls, but all the same they'd become all the rage with the town's younger girls. I guess it was due to the same reaction that people had to bulldogs? Ugly and cute at the same time.

Still, our stock was starting to run low. Soon, I'd need to go out and collect more. I helped out until sunset, then made my way back to the armorer's. I had promised to help out appraising items, after all.

"Good evening," I said, walking in through the door. "It's Noir."

"Oh, you're the boy from before. I've been waiting for you."

"I came to appraise those items. Are you free?"

"Yes, of course!"

Perhaps it was a good idea to negotiate a little first.

"You mentioned you'd compensate me for my services. For example, by helping me purchase a shield…"

"If I can help you with anything," said the armorer, "I will. If something in the shop appeals to you, I'll happily give you a discount."

Mission accomplished!

The armorer went into the back and came back with several pieces, lining them up carefully on the counter: an oblong shield, an iron gauntlet, a rusty helmet, and a pair of leather shoes.

"I acquired these pieces recently—some from a fallen noble family, others from an ogre village. My gut tells me they're all high quality, but I'm not always right."

Which was where I came in.

"Where should we start?" I asked.

"How about this helmet? It's quite rusted, but it's previous owner was an S-Grade member of a famous guild."

"Well, that's impressive."

“He always wore it, so it must be something special.”

The shopkeeper was right to have such high expectations. The helmet had two skills: Durable and Grade A Fire Resistance. When I told him, he clapped for joy.

“An A-Grade skill?! So that thing can ward off most fire magic. It might even work against dragon breath! Take a look at the gauntlet next.”

“This gauntlet…has no skills.”

“No way! I bought it from a famous trader for seven million…”

I guess he’d been swindled. There were certainly people who used their fame to take advantage of others. Or maybe the shopkeeper was just unlucky.

“Well, all I can do now is laugh it off,” he said. “Let’s move on to these.”

“They’re shoes, right?”

They looked well-made, at least. The leather was shiny and free from imperfections but, more importantly, they had the Swift Foot skill. Anyone who wore them would be Swift Footed until they took them off again. They would definitely fetch a high price.

“Yes!” the armorer cheered, punching the air. “That’s just what I’d hoped for. I picked them up from a thief during my travels. He was unusually quick on his feet.”

The shopkeeper was only Level 4, and he had no combat skills. He must have had a guard do the dirty work. Still, his shop seemed to be doing well, so I guess he could afford it.

“Now for the last item, the shield.”

“You seem a little nervous about this one,” I said.

“I am, it’s the most precious of the lot. It came from a ruined noble from another land. I lent him money, and he gave me this in exchange.”

His social status sounds like none of your business, but…

The shield was a little unwieldy, but you could still hold it in one hand. With a different fighting style, it could be quite useful. I used my Discerning Eye and realized we’d hit the jackpot. It had Durable, Grade A

Fire Resistance, Grade A Water Resistance, and Grade A Wind Resistance all at once, and carried the name “Shield of Champions.”

“Now this one’s really special!” I said. “It has four skills on it.”

“Goodness!”

“Oh, did I say four? I meant five.”

“Even better!” cried the shopkeeper.

But it wasn’t. The last skill sounded more like a ginormous problem. I checked into it with my Editor skill.

Life-Draining Curse: Continually drains the life of living creatures.

Whoa, it was even worse than I thought. If I Bestowed that skill on a person, it would probably kill them. It would probably drain the life from whoever was holding it. But the owner didn’t know that. He was still rubbing his hands together in anticipation. After a moment, he reached out for the shield.

“Stop! Don’t touch it!”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because the fifth skill is a curse. It’ll drain your life force if you touch it.”

“Oh dear…”

The shopkeeper pulled back and stared at it with worried eyes.

“Now that you mention it,” he said. “The previous owner did say that touching it made him feel ill. He really just kept it as a display piece.”

“The skill is pretty vicious,” I told him. “It constantly drains life from living creatures. But as a shield, it’s definitely top-class.”

“So it raises your defense at the cost of your life…”

The shopkeeper seemed to be at a bit of a loss. Even putting this thing away would be a little awkward now.

“Will you sell it?” I asked.

“Absolutely not. I have a reputation to think about. I couldn’t sell that to a customer.”

“So you’ll dispose of it?”

“I’d like to, but I don’t know how to go about doing so safely…”

If he wasn’t careful, someone could get hurt. He was a good person, and really didn’t want that to happen. I took a look at how much LP it’d take to break the curse.

Only 5,000, huh?

I’d gotten so much at the hot springs that it was no problem. And, if I wanted a high-quality shield, this was probably my best option.

“Um, would you sell it to me?” I asked.

“You want to use it?” asked the shopkeeper. “Even with the curse?”

“Oh, of course not. But I have a friend who can break curses. I don’t mind paying a fair price.”

“In that case,” he said. “I’ll let you have it for ten thousand rels.”

“Are you sure that’s enough?”

“I can’t sell a defective item at full price. And I’m sure removing the curse won’t come cheap.”

“Well, thank you very much. I’ll take it.”

I paid on the spot, then went ahead and quietly removed the curse skill.

“Here,” said the shopkeeper. “Take this to carry it home.”

The attentive shopkeeper brought out a wooden board. He picked up the shield with a pole and set it on top. That way, I could carry the shield without touching it.

“Thank you.”

Of course, it didn’t matter if I touched it now, but I kept up the pretense.

“You can throw the board away when you’re done with it,” he said.

“Thank you very much. I’ll be sure to shop here again.”

“Oh no, thank you. Now I can sell that helmet and those shoes, and I won’t lose any more of my life to that shield. I’ll see you again soon!”

It felt like a win-win for the both of us. Once I got out of the shop I grabbed the shield with my bare hands. It didn’t drain my life at all. Even better, because it had been used as a decorative piece, it was hardly worn.

“I bet I won’t have any trouble getting through the tenth floor with this!”

Looking forward to working with you, Shield of Champions!

Chapter 27:
The Path of Laughter

IT WAS TIME to take on the tenth floor of the hidden dungeon. Before I turned the corner to face the stone dog, I pulled out the Shield of Champions and a large mallet that I'd bought at a weapons shop. With a little luck, it would be more useful against a stone enemy than a sword or spear.

I poked my head around the corner and saw that stone dog was still there with its mouth wide open. It didn't look like much, but that thing was Level 200. Even if my shield held up against the Red Particle Beam, there was no telling whether the mallet could destroy it. Time to ask the Great Sage.

If I wanted to Bestow a skill on my weapon to deal with a stone enemy, which should I use?

<If it is a bladed weapon, Stone Cutter. If it is a blunt-force weapon, Stone Crusher. Either skill should make it easier to destroy stone or statue-type enemies.>

I guess I could have used the sword after all. But I didn't want to waste my fancy new mallet, either, so I decided to let the LP cost decide.

Stone Cutter would cost 500 LP to create and another 1,000 to Bestow on my sword. Stone Crusher also cost 500 LP, but it was only 200 to Bestow it on the mallet. I guess it was better suited to smashing up rocks in the first place. I spent the 700 LP and found myself with a mallet perfect for smashing stone enemies.

I took up my shield in my left hand and the mallet in my right. Then I made sure I could use Dungeon Elevator again, just in case. Finally, I turned the corner and approached the stone dog. As I got closer, it manifested particles of light into its mouth, just like before. I held my breath and prayed that the shield would hold. When the beam fired, I held up my shield to block it. The beam sizzled when it struck the metal but

showed no sign of burning through. I pushed forward and smashed the stone dog to pieces with my mallet.

“Serves you right!”

I’d won! It was over! Or at least, so I thought. But even though the only thing left of the dog was its head, it still tried to fire its beam again.

“Give up and die already!”

Before it managed to fire, I smashed its head with my mallet and reduced it to rubble. I stood over it for a few moments to make sure it was really dead this time, then let out a sigh of relief. How could it fight when it was only a head? Creepy. But I’d beaten it, and I’d even leveled up in the process.

I pressed on down the hallway, hoping to find something valuable. After about five minutes, I ran into a dead end. Alright, not *quite* a dead end. There were three holes in the wall at the end, each of them just large enough to squeeze through. There was also a piece of paper on the floor. I picked it up and read it.

If you are looking for the stairs: you can pick any hole. On your left is the Path of Anger, the middle is the Path of Sorrow, and to the right is the Path of Laughter. Pick the one that suits you best.

No more help seemed to be forthcoming. It was hard to figure out if I could trust a piece of paper, but if what it said *was* true, then I could take any path to the eleventh floor. What kind of choice was that, anyway? Of course I’d pick the Path of Laughter. I went through the right hole, and found a door just inside. I opened it and walked through.

“Yeeeeeah!”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

Everything had changed. All of a sudden, I was in what looked like a trendy bar, standing on the stage. I didn’t understand what was going on, but everyone was applauding me.

“What’s going on?”

The audience didn’t seem hostile, but the fact that I couldn’t see them with Discerning Eye implied that they weren’t normal. I couldn’t let my

guard down, but no attack ever came. An old man at the back of the room smiled gently.

“You’re the comedian for today, huh? Do your best to entertain us and—”

There was a man in a top hat and tails standing beside him. He opened the door at the back of the room.

“The stairs?!”

“Yes,” said the old man. “We’ll give you the path you seek.”

So that was why this was called the Path of Laughter. It didn’t mean *I* would be laughing. I had to amuse other people.

“Don’t think you can just force your way through,” the old man warned. “Or you shall not return with your life.”

So, they’d kill me if I failed. Why did it always come down to killing? I had no idea how strong they were, but either way, fighting was a stupid plan. I was completely outnumbered.

“So I just have to be funny, huh?” I asked.

“I’m looking forward to it. Come on everyone, give him a big round of applause!”

I was incredibly nervous, but I just had to give it my best shot!

I approached the front of the stage and wiggled my arms and legs around in a strange dance. My father always stretched like this when he got out of the bath. I made kissing sounds with my mouth and crossed my eyes. I figured making a fool out of myself was a good place to start.

“So, I was swimming earlier,” I said. “And I saw this huge octopus monster. I looked at it, and it was like…wiggle, wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!”

I used my whole body to do my best impression of an octopus. I thought it was pretty funny, but I didn’t get a single laugh, not even a mean-spirited chuckle.

Where did all that applause from earlier go, guys?

“Um, ahem, so for my next trick,” I said. “An impression of a golden slime.”

I flopped down on the floor, abandoning whatever dignity I had left. After a moment, I popped back up again.

“Tadaah!”

I’d thought it was pretty realistic, but the atmosphere was frosty. About half the people had already left to start drinking. I had to up my game, and fast. It was time to bring out my secret weapon.

“All right, now I’m going to write something with my butt!”

And this was no normal butt-writing. Oh no! I did my best to write my name with the most ridiculous, over-the-top gestures.

By the time I got to the last letter, everyone had gone. The only person still watching was that dapper old man. I sighed.

“Wasn’t that…funny?”

“Please leave,” he said. “You don’t belong here.”

“Okay…”

I slipped back through the doorway with a broken heart. I suppose I could have tried again, but I was too traumatized by my first attempt.

I’m sorry, father. I have no sense of humor. I guess I really am your son.

“Okay,” I said, psyching myself back up again. “Enough moping! This isn’t over!”

So it was either Path of Anger or the Path of Sorrow next. Which to choose, which to choose…

Chapter 28:
The Path of Anger

IN THE END, I decided to take the Path of Anger. Both of my remaining options likely involved doing something unkind—assuming they followed the same pattern established by the Path of Laughter. But in my experience, it was easier to enrage a stranger than it was to make them sad. At least, that was my reasoning.

Just like the last path, there was a door just inside the hole in the wall. I opened it and went through.

"Welcome to the strongest battalion!" someone shouted.

Too loud. That was a pretty aggressive greeting. Standing around me were ten soldiers in light armor, and all of them were smiling at me. The rest of the room looked like a training ground. It was even big enough to hold a bunch of target dummies and the like.

"So," I said, "I just kinda ended up here. I don't know anything about this place."

"Ah ha ha ha! You're so funny!" said one of the soldiers. "You're here to join the strongest battalion, aren't you? If not, you should go back the way you came."

"I-I see. I guess I am."

I wouldn't get anywhere if I didn't play along. I still couldn't see any of these guys with my Discerning Eye, so they had to be illusions just like the guys in the comedy club. A dandyish gentleman with a stylish beard offered me his hand, and I shook it.

"I'm Son, leader of the battalion. Welcome to our ranks. Would you care to train with us today?"

"If you'll have me," I answered.

"Absolutely. Your garb is…somewhat unusual, but it will do for now. Shall we get started?"

Unlike in the comedy club, I didn't get any advice this time. But, after a quick glance around, I noticed a door on the far side of the training ground.

"Sir," I said. "Can I ask you something first? What's behind that door?"

"That's like a jail cell. We throw any good-for-nothings in there as punishment."

Aha! That was it! The stairs had to be on the other side of that door. All I had to do was piss them off enough that they threw me in there.

"First off," said Son. "Let's start with sword swings. Are you ready?"

I obediently took out my weapon and started swinging. I'd been at it a while by the time I realized this wasn't likely to piss them off. The thought of disobeying orders was a little scary, but I couldn't stay here forever. I stopped what I was doing and sat down.

"What do you think you're doing, newcomer?" Son asked.

"I'm tired," I said. "I'm taking a break"

"A *break?*"

He frowned at me. They'd said they were the strongest battalion, so surely they were strict about laziness? But Son just rubbed his beard and shrugged.

"Oh well," he said. "You are new, after all. I guess it's to be expected."

It…felt strange to be so disappointed that I wasn't in trouble. I tried lying down, even closing my eyes, but none of them seemed to care.

"Hah!" someone laughed. "New guy's already exhausted. I guess everyone starts somewhere."

What the heck? They couldn't have been less angry if they tried. What was with all these generous words of support? I mean, it was nice and all, but that was kinda the problem. While I lay there trying to figure it out, they moved on to sparring with live blades.

"Newcomer," said Son. "Why don't you go first?"

"Um, okay."

Time to behave as badly as possible!

“You can do it, new guy,” urged one of the soldiers.

“I’ve got high hopes for you,” said another.

They all seemed pretty excited. My opponent was an older boy with narrow eyes. He raised his sword and pointed it at me, but I just ignored him.

“You guys aren’t the strongest battalion,” I said. “You’re garbage!”

“Come on, new guy,” said my opponent. “Don’t be like that.”

“Come on,” I said, waving my sword. “Come at me.”

I stuck out my tongue, taunting him, but he just smiled and swung his sword. Time to try something else. I knocked his sword upwards, then kicked him in the arm.

“Oops…”

His sword clattered to the ground. That was it! I’d won! It turned out he wasn’t so strong after all.

“Wow, new guy!” he said. “You’re pretty good!”

“Am I?” I shot back. “Or are you just awful? I mean, I didn’t even use *half* my strength there. Is your name some kind of joke? Strongest battalion my butt!”

“……”

Silence fell like a ton of bricks. Good, I’d hurt their pride. It felt like a volcano was about to erupt…but in the end, all that erupted was laughter.

“You’re so funny!”

“Hey, the new guy’s got real fire in him, huh?! I can’t wait to see what he can do!”

They all laughed until they doubled over. Maybe this situation *was* pretty funny. I even found myself giggling along with them before I caught myself.

But this was bad. This was really bad. Why were they so nice?! I couldn’t figure out what to do so, when they went back to their training, I plopped myself down next to the door and tried the handle. It was locked.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Son shouted.

Ack!

I jumped out of my skin, already starting to apologize, but he wasn’t talking to me. One of the other recruits had fallen over during training. The others all gathered around him.

“Stand up, dumbass! You think you’re gonna make it if this is all you’ve got, maggot?!”

“S-sorry.”

“Stand up! You have three seconds.”

The timid man stood up, but his legs buckled and he immediately fell down again. Son looked down at him cruelly.

“You’re out.”

“Sir, please!” said the man. “Give me another chance! I’ll get up!”

He forced himself to stand, but this time Son kicked him in the shin. He promptly collapsed again, and the other soldiers burst out laughing. Why were they treating him so differently than me? It didn’t make any sense.

“You’re done,” Son told the timid man. “Get your things and go back under whatever rock you crawled out from.”

“But sir, please! I have family back home! If I lose this job, they’ll die!”

“Oh, boo hoo! Please. Why should I give a damn?”

“But…”

No one went to his aid. They all just pointed and laughed like children. It was disgusting. Before I knew what I was doing, I was right up in Son’s face.

“I don’t care what he did,” I said. “You’ve crossed a line.”

“He’s a disgrace to the unit.”

“He’s keeping up better than I did,” I shot back. “Perhaps you shouldn’t be such a jackass.”

“What, you’re taking his side?”

“You don’t get strong by bullying the weak. You should defend them. That’s what earns you the right to call yourself the strongest.”

“You have no right to lecture me!” Son snapped.

The others started heckling me, too. This anger didn’t feel natural. Something more was going on.

“Oh, wait,” I said. “Does this mean I passed the Path of Anger?”

I’d forgotten about it for a moment there, but I guess that did the trick. Maybe they would take me to that room now.

“Sir,” said one of the soldiers. “Let’s kill him!”

“Good idea,” Son agreed. “Can’t let him spread nasty rumors. Everyone—attack!”

That was…not what I expected. They came at me all at once with their swords drawn. Individually, I could take them, but all on at once? This was going to be a challenge. While I tried to figure out what to do, I ducked behind one of the wooden practice dummies.

“Die, new guy!”

I dodged. Somehow, the guy’s sword got stuck in the practice dummy. Not one to miss an opportunity, I punched him in the nuts.

“Aghh!”

“Sorry, you gave me no other choice.”

That tactic had worked well once already, so I tried it again. If they surrounded me, I’d be toast. So I just kept dodging out of the way, hiding behind the dummies. If I could find a way to use magic, I could end this. Skipping back from another blow, I produced the skill Explode and Bestowed it on the dummy. It blew up immediately, sending wood and shrapnel flying everywhere. The soldiers staggered back in shock, and I took the opportunity to fire off some forty-inch Stone Bullets.

“Ugh!”

Their light armor didn’t stand a chance. Son was the only one with any real skill. When I fired a rock at him, he somehow sliced it in two.

“You won’t get past me, pipsqueak.”

I quickly examined his sword. It was a B-Grade weapon called the Bladeless Blade. A bit of an odd name, but it did have both the Rock Cutter and Tree Cutter skills on it. I caught his slash against my sword.

“How is a greenhorn like you so strong…?” he growled.

I was stronger than him. I could do this. I pushed back with all my might, and Son lost his footing. I blew up another wooden dummy to distract him and fired off a gout of Holy Flame. The white fire caught in his hair and set his beard on fire.

“Hot! Hot!”

He dropped his sword and tried frantically to put it out. I hadn’t put much power into the fire, so he patted out the flames without any real injury. While he was busy doing that, I picked up his sword and used it, along with my own, to trap his neck in a pincer. Son froze.

“You bastard.”

“I’m uppity, aren’t I?” I agreed. “Think I’ll sit in that cell and reflect on my actions.”

“What?”

“Gimme the key.”

“No!”

I sighed. “Well, guess I have to take it by force then.”

“Here, take it!”

Once he realized he was in danger, he handed it over right away. I took it from him, careful to keep an eye on him as I headed for the door.

“Wait,” he shouted after me. “That’s my sword!”

“You threw it away,” I said. “That’s no way to treat a perfectly good sword. I’m giving it a new home.”

“Y-you’re a monster! Never show your face here again!”

No fear there, buddy.

I never had any intention of coming here again. The key seemed to be real, so I opened the door. The room beyond was small, and the stairs down to the next floor were right in the middle of it.

“Yes!”

I raised my newly acquired sword in celebration.

Time to head down.

Chapter 29:
Home Sweet Home

FINALLY, I was safely on the eleventh floor. Phew! Of course, every floor had its own challenges, but I felt like I deserved a reward after all that. I walked down the stairs quickly, feeling very pleased with myself, but I was quickly snapped back to reality.

"It's…so hot."

Maybe sweltering was a better word. There was even magma down here! That wasn't something you saw every day. There was a path through the volcanic chamber, but it was uneven and covered in ash. The space on either side was massive, dotted with boulders.

Would fire resistance work against magma? Would even the S-Grade version of that skill keep me safe down here? There were probably limits to what the human body could take. I inched along the path, drenched in sweat. It was hard to avoid the magma, and I was parched.

"Haa haa…"

I pulled some water out of my pocket dimension and gulped it all down. That's when something moved in the corner of my vision. The fin of something. A fish? It couldn't be. It was huge and swimming through the magma. It had to be a monster. I crept close enough to use Discerning Eye.

Name: Magmafish

Level: 260

Skills: High-Speed Swimming; Poison Sight

What the hell?! I'd only just gotten down here, and I was already facing monsters like that? They only seemed to be getting more powerful the further down I went. To be expected, perhaps, but still annoying.

"That's it. I'm calling it quits for today."

It was so hot that I could barely breathe, and I *really* didn't feel like fighting that magmafish. So I collected a few pebbles and pieces of rock in the hopes that they might sell in the shop, then used the Dungeon Elevator to head back out.

The air was refreshingly cool outside, and I quickly made my way home. But when I opened the front door of my house, Emma came out running.

"Lemme guess," I said. "You're here to hang out?"

"You betcha! Hey, c'mere."

She led me into the living room. There were a bunch of strange things laid out on the table.

"I knew you wouldn't be gone long," Emma said. "Enjoy!"

I looked more closely at the things on the table. A seafood salad made with blue wakame, and grilled rice balls made with red kombu. They were all dishes prepared with items I'd retrieved from the ninth floor. I thought we'd sold all of this. Had she saved some?

"Your mom helped me make them," said Emma. "Try! Try!"

"Well, they *do* look unusual."

"Think it'll earn you some LP?" she asked.

I sat down to investigate. You could hardly tell the rice balls were made with red kombu, but the salad looked a little dubious. There was minced cabbage, thinly sliced salmon, shrimp, tomatoes, and scallops, but it was the blue wakame that stood out the most. It was a nice color, if a little unusual. I wanted to admire them a little longer, but my mother and Emma were insistent. I took a bite out of a rice ball.

"Delicious!"

I know it sounded phony, but it was true! The outside was crunchy and the inside was soft and savory with miso. Miso came from another dimension, but it was pretty well-known. It was often used in soups, but it was fantastic in rice, too. The finely chopped red kombu flakes only served to heighten the flavor. It had a nice chew and was just a touch spicy.

"Try the salad next," Emma urged.

“All right…whoa, this is great, too! The wakame is perfectly steeped. It’s delicious! Just the right amount of sour.”

“Right?” Emma said. “Apparently all blue wakame tastes like that.”

“I guess it really *is* different from the normal kind.”

Not to insult normal wakame, but it mostly tasted like nothing. This stuff was on a whole other level. I was pretty hungry, so I scarfed down the lot. It filled up both my stomach and my LP pool. As I patted my stomach, Emma wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Eh he he, are you satisfied, sir?”

“Well, I say! I am most certainly stuffed.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Emma said. “I worked my fingers to the bone to make it.”

“Thank you kindly, fair maiden.”

My mother watched us both, smiling to herself.

“You two are close as ever. Did you have fun at the hot springs?”

“It was so fun!” Emma said. “But you wouldn’t believe what happened: the boys in our class tried to peep on us!”

“Oh, goodness!”

“But Noir tried to stop them,” Emma went on. “He was all like, ‘Emma’s body belongs to me!’ and crushed them!”

“My!” said mother. “You’ve gotten quite bold with Emma, haven’t you Noir?”

“I know!” Emma said. “He just loses his head over me. It’s a real pain sometimes.”

Dammit! The conversation moved on before I could correct her. That was something a common pervert would say. Although…I guess I probably fit the description.

Before Emma could get me into any more trouble, father and Tigerson got home.

“Oh,” said father. “Emma’s here?”

“I am! Did you have a good day at work?”

“Yes, thank you! And thanks for buying that kombu and wakame.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” said Emma. “Think of it as a little allowance for the Stardia family.”

Ahhh, so that was the answer. Emma had bought the kombu and wakame from the store. My father grinned from ear-to-ear, grabbing my shoulders.

“You’re such a lucky boy—having a rich and lovely friend like Emma. I’m so jealous.”

“I do appreciate her,” I told him. “And her cooking was delicious.”

My father looked down at the empty plates. His stomach growled.

“Alice is shopping for groceries,” he said. “Let’s go find her and all go out for a meal together!”

“Father, weren’t you listening to what I just said?” I asked. “I’m full.”

“What? You’re sayin’ you won’t eat my food?”

“I’m saying the fact you’re the one suggesting it is enough to put me off.”

“Did you all hear that?” father shouted. “My sweet boy is going through his rebellious phase. How horrible!”

He pretended to cry. My mother shook her head.

“Dear,” she said cooly. “Alice says *all sorts of things* behind your back. All. Sorts. Of things.”

“Uh…really?” said father. “Like what?”

“You shall just have to ask her yourself.”

She was messing with him. She was absolutely messing with him. But he was starting to get really upset.

“Tigerson, do you know what Alice says about me?!”

*<Hmm, let’s see. ‘Father is such a *******!’ or ‘Father is so ****.’ Things like that.>*

“I don’t understand. What were those words you censored?”

Tigerson shook his head gravely. *<I fear the shock of it might kill you.>*

“It’s that bad?!” father wailed, clutching his head.

The rest of us started laughing. Just how shocking could it be? He endured my verbal attacks with no problem. I guess the idea of it coming from his innocent little daughter made it harder to bear.

In the end, father was a mere shell of his former self. We dragged him out to meet Alice, then headed to a fancy restaurant together. Our shop was doing well, so we could afford to indulge a little. My father kept urging me to eat more, so I kept on stuffing my face until I thought my stomach might explode. I was a growing boy, but there was only so much food I could handle!

Perhaps I could give myself the Gluttony skill to make it easier to swallow?

Heh, easier to swallow.

No, I quickly gave up that idea. How would Emma and the others feel if I started piling on the pounds?

“Eat more, Noir!” Emma said. “I would never stop liking you for getting fat!”

I guess that decided it then!

Extra Chapter:
Happiness in Both Hands

WE WERE EXACTLY three weeks into our summer break, which meant it was officially halfway over. Still, I felt like I'd used my time to the fullest. Little by little, I was getting stronger.

I walked home from work, debating what to do with my afternoon, when I found Leila in my living room.

"Hiya," she said. "Sorry to barge in like this."

"I haven't seen you in ages!"

"Sorry for always dropping by unannounced," she said. "Your mother said you would be home soon. She told me to come in."

Nice save, mother! Everyone else was out at the shop, so it was just the two of us.

"I take it you're here to train me," I said.

"Well, I did make a promise."

"It's really not that big a deal," I told her. "But let's go out into the yard."

It was pretty shabby for a noble's estate, but there was enough space for us to train, at least. I started with some warmups, but Leila made a funny face.

"You know, Noir, you're plenty strong already. Are you sure you need me to train you?"

"I do," I insisted. "I'm not strong enough to win fights on brute force alone."

When I had enough LP to use Get Creative, Editor, and Bestow, that was a different story. But on my own, things could quickly get dicey.

Leila looked skeptical. "Really? Well, whatever. Let's get started."

"Yes, please."

I asked her to train me in hand-to-hand combat—no weapons. I wanted to know so much! How to throw a punch, effective points to target, throws, locks, and feints. But I also didn't want to bite off more than I could chew. For now, we just focused on proper punching technique.

"Form is important, of course," said Leila. "But it doesn't have to be perfect in a real combat situation."

That made good sense. There were plenty of situations where you might be forced to throw a punch in less than ideal circumstances.

"But," Leila said. "As long as you know the basics, you can put them to use in practical ways, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're so stiff!" she laughed. "Just relax, we're friends."

I threw another punch, and another, and we kept going like that for a while. After all, I was only going to get good once I'd done it as many times as I'd swung my sword. I needed my body to remember the movement. When I got tired, my form started to slip, but Leila just took my hand and gently corrected it.

Maybe I should start calling her "master." No, wait, I already have a master…

I was sweating buckets, but I had to keep going if I wanted to get stronger.

"It's already past noon," Leila said. "Maybe we should take a break."

"Sure! But…would you teach me some throws first?"

"You really are into this! Sure, let's try it."

We started to grapple.

"First," she said, "and this is like, super basic, try to pull me toward you and sweep my legs out from under me."

"Got it."

I did as I was told and downed her repeatedly. Just like we'd done with punches, we repeated the action again and again.

"You really are a hard worker, Leila."

“I am?” she asked, sounding surprised. “Noir, you’re the one who’s always working.”

That wasn’t true. Not really. With all the skills I got from Olivia, everything was much easier. Of course, I was putting *some* work in, but still…

“I just mean you work so much harder than I do,” I said. “Even though we’re the same age. I really admire you.”

“Well,” said Leila. “I feel the same way. You were so kind to my little brother. There aren’t many people who would do what you did for him. It meant a lot to me.”

“Oh, you’re embarrassing me.”

“Good!” she said. “But it’s the truth. I really can’t thank you enough. Anyway, back to training!”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll keep it up!”

I was really fired up, but…I was also exhausted. When I tried to swipe her feet out from under her again, I slipped.

“Whoa!”

“Eek! Hey?!”

My technique was awful. While I did manage to knock her down, I also landed on top of her.

Oh no!

I was so worried about crushing her that I grabbed hold of something I definitely shouldn’t have.

Squish.

I had made a serious error in judgment. I panicked and tried to get up, but somehow ended up giving her a good squeeze.

“Ouch!”

“Ahhh!” I cried. “I-I’m so sorry!”

I pried myself off her, apologizing profusely. Leila’s face was bright red. She covered her chest and got up.

“I-I-It’s not your fault,” she said. “You’re exhausted…”

“Y-yeah…”

We were too embarrassed to make eye contact after that. I hadn’t even known Leila for very long. What if she thought I was a jerk now?

I glanced around guiltily, freezing solid when I saw Emma staring at me from one of the windows.

“I saw that!” she said.

“Wh-when did you get here?” I asked. Nope, I had to do better than that. “It’s not what it looks like!”

“Not what it looks like my butt!” Emma said. “You were totally copping a feel!”

“I was not!”

“And it wasn’t just once. You did it three times!”

Did I really? My memory was so hazy. Maybe my hand did something evil while I wasn’t paying attention? Fortunately, Leila came to my rescue.

“It really was just an accident,” she said. “We were training.”

Emma didn’t even look at her. She just stalked over and stared me right in the eye.

“You could’ve just told me.”

“What?”

“You should talk to me before you do stuff like that.”

Oh no! This was all such a grave misunderstanding. I could see the pity in Emma’s eyes. I was sure this was going to end badly, but then…she grabbed my right hand and placed it on her own chest.

“There!” she said, triumphant.

“Wh-what?!” I said. “Emma what are you doing?!”

“You’ll get LP from this too, right? Ah!”

LP…? Y-yeah, that’s what this was about. Totally that. Emma was always so thoughtful. And it really did feel nice. Just then, a shout rang out

through the yard.

“Eeeek! What are you doing to my Noir!”

“Lola?”

Lola was standing in the doorway, carrying a lunch box for some reason. She tossed it aside and came running. When she reached me, she grabbed my left hand and placed it on *her* chest! Was this…some sort of new trend I’d missed out on?

“What do you think, Mr. Noir?!” said Lola.

“What do I what?” I asked, bewildered.

“Good? Bad? Be honest.”

“It’s good? Very good.”

What else was I meant to say? I was dumbstruck. And, before I could get out of this whole situation, more tragedy unfolded.

“Sir Noir, I was wondering if you would care to join me for lu—huh? Lola, Lady Emma, what on earth are you doing?!”

Now *there* was a normal reaction. Good on you, Luna! But when she saw where my hands were, she looked down at her own chest.

“So any woman will do? You know, I’m a woman, too, so…”

“I-I have an explanation for this…” I stammered.

“I see,” said Luna. “It’s the LP, isn’t it? Then leave it to me. Excuse me.”

Luna went around behind me and pressed up against my back.

I give up. What is even going on anymore?

Even Leila was at a complete loss for words.

Why does this always happen to me?

“Brother dearest,” a voice called from inside the house. “Come see! I got a perfect score on my test! Praise m—what’s going on here?”

“Oh, h-hi, Alice, it’s a little complicated to explain but—”

“I understand,” she said. “I see *exactly* how it is.”

Did she understand? Really? Because I sure as hell didn’t.

Alice went inside, only to come back out with our father’s sword and a terrifying look in her eyes. Nothing good could come of this.

“Duel me for my brother! I, Alice Stardia, announce my intent!”

There was no way to stop this. I was doomed. Best just to give up and let it happen.

It was certainly one of the more exciting days of summer break.

Looking back on it, I decided that the one thing I would remember was the happiness in both my hands.



Afterword

HELLO, HELLO! Meguru Seto here! I never know what to write for these things, so I figured I might as well put some enthusiasm into it…

The truth is, I'm not really in that great of a mood right now. I'm sitting here with the news on in the background, and I can't stop thinking about everything that's happening in the world. But let's shelve that for now.

I would like to offer a hearty thank you to everyone who bought volume three of Hidden Dungeon. I started writing this at the beginning of 2017, and the rest of the year went by in a flash. I keep trying to remember what was I thinking back then. What was I trying to do? Honestly, I don't really remember. I've never been particularly talented, but lately I've been starting to worry about whether my brain works at all. I have a hard time focusing, and I keep forgetting things…like where I put my hat or my glasses. At least I'm not at the point where I'm forgetting to put on underwear. If that started happening, I really would need to check myself into the hospital.

At any rate, because I was feeling like my brain wasn't working very well, I started doing something to increase my ability—exercise.

Why exercise, you ask? Apparently it's much better for your mind than mental exercises. And so I've started exercising. I was always into sports when I was a kid, but it's been a few years since I did any of that and when I tried again…I felt like death! Especially my legs and my back!

When I tried going on a serious run, I twisted my ankle, my back started hurting, and my heart pounded so hard I thought I was going to die. That sure taught me a lesson about easing back into things gently.

Anyway, enough of that nonsense! On to some announcements!

The series is getting a manga adaptation in *Niconico Seiga x Suiyoubi Sirius* by Tomoyuki Hino! The first chapter comes out on May 2nd. I know how this sounds coming from the author, but the manga really is great. It's

incredible! The illustrations have a lot of punch and can express things you can’t get across in words.

I grew up reading shonen manga, so I’m happy to see my work adapted for the medium. It’s exciting to see how it works out and see the character’s expressions. I feel a little awkward, like I’m bragging about my own work, but it really is great.

There are a lot of subtly erotic scenes with the girls in the novels, and the manga does them all justice. Both Noir and Emma really come to life on the page. I know you’ll enjoy it, so give it a read!

And now I guess it’s about time I did my thank yous. Thank you to Takehana Note for providing the wonderful illustrations again. The new member of the cast, Leila, turned out especially cool and cute, and all the other characters looked incredible too.

To my editor Shou Ji, thank you for everything you do for me. This time I have to give you an extra thanks for all the additional help you gave me with this volume.

And thank you to everyone else who’s assisted in helping bring the book to publication. The proofreaders had a lot of corrections this time, and I can’t thank them enough for their hard work.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to give a hearty thank you to everyone who picked up this book.

I hope to see you again soon!



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